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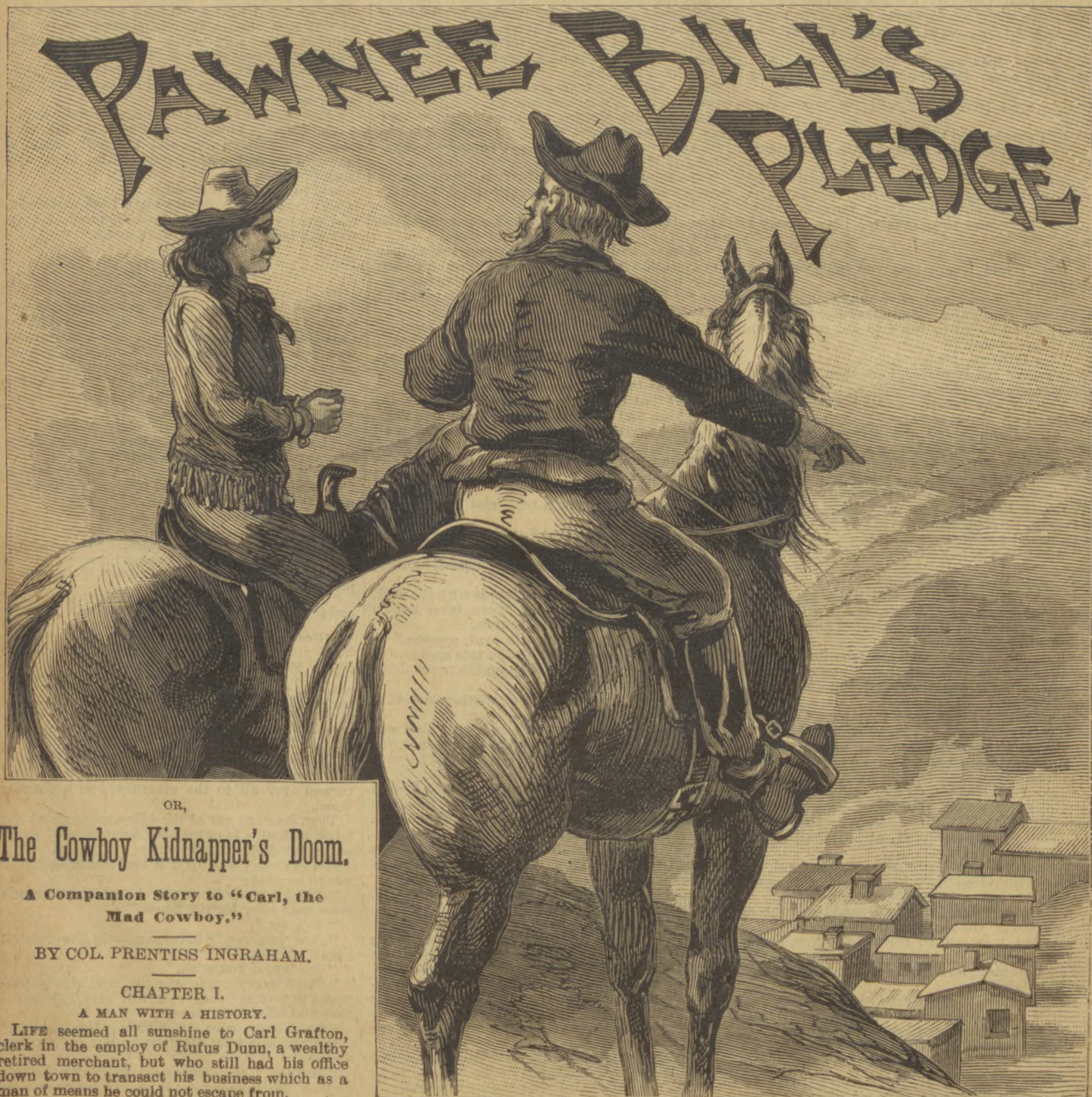
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OR,

The Cowboy Kidnapper's Doom.

A Companion Story to "Carl, the
Mad Cowboy."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

A MAN WITH A HISTORY.

LIFE seemed all sunshine to Carl Grafton, clerk in the employ of Rufus Dunn, a wealthy retired merchant, but who still had his office down town to transact his business which as a man of means he could not escape from.

Carl Grafton was his confidential clerk, in

THE CAPTURED PAWNEE BILL BEHELD THE PICTURESQUE CAMP OF THE BANDITS OF THE RIO.

fact a private secretary, and had charge of Mr. Dunn's collection of rents and general management of his estates.

Mr. Dunn had first seen his clerk as ordinary seaman on board of a sailing vessel bound from San Francisco to Philadelphia, and had spoken to his daughter about the young and handsome seaman, whose refined manners and intelligent face seemed out of place before the mast in a merchant ship.

Rounding the "Horn" the vessel was caught in a violent tempest, dismasted, and her captain, first mate and half of the crew swept overboard.

Then it was that the seaman, known only as Carl, came to the front as a man of nerve and skill, and it was owing to his coolness and courage that the ship was saved.

Having sprung a leak that it was impossible to check, the passengers and crew had to take to the boats, and Mr. Dunn and his little daughter were glad to go in the cutter of which Carl had command.

After days of tossing about upon the ocean the cutter was picked up by a passing vessel and saved.

It was the only one of the three boats that escaped.

And in those days of danger and suffering in the little boat Carl Grafton had shielded Emma Dunn, then a girl of fourteen, from every hardship, and had done all in his power for her and her father.

The vessel that rescued them was in sight of New York when Mr. Dunn sought the young sailor and said:

"Carl, you have never told me your other name?"

"My name is Carl Grafton, sir."

"And do you expect to again risk the dangers of the sea as a sailor?"

"I hope not, sir, as I shall seek work in the city, for, to be frank with you, Mr. Dunn, I shipped as a sailor merely to work my way to New York and thus save the little money I had."

"Ah! that is it, is it?"

"Well, I told Emma that you were a man of education."

"Yes, sir, I received advantages up to my eighteenth year, and then adversity fell upon us and I had to go to work to aid in the support of my mother."

"Your father is dead then?"

The young man started, and then answered with strange emotion:

"Yes, sir, my father is dead—dead to the world and all who loved him."

If Mr. Dunn noted the strange reply he showed no sign of it, and after a moment said:

"See here, Carl, I am about to retire from business, and I have a large estate to look after."

"I need help, for I shall have to have an office, and I'll make you my clerk, my private secretary, in fact, and it will pay you a couple of thousand a year to start with."

"What do you say to accepting service under me?"

"Say, sir?—say, Mr. Dunn?"

"I can only say that I will most gladly accept your generous offer, sir, and I will prove by my devotion to your interests, how much I appreciate your kindness."

"But, Mr. Dunn," and his face flushed, "I have not a recommendation, I have not a reference in the world, sir, and you know nothing about me."

"I will accept you upon your face, Carl, and here is my address in Philadelphia, so come there within the next two weeks, for I am going first to place Emma at school, and visit a sister, so will not be home for some days."

"May I ask if you need money?"

"No, sir, I thank you, for I have nearly a hundred dollars."

"Well, fit yourself out, and I shall expect you to report on time."

"I shall be there, sir, without fail, and my mother will indeed be happy to hear of my good fortune, sir, all owing to your kindness."

"Well, Carl, but for you I would now be at the bottom of the sea, for you saved us all from death; but it is not to reward you that I offer you this position, but because I need a reliable, intelligent man, and I believe you to be all that I could wish."

And so it was when two weeks after Carl Grafton entered upon his career as Mr. Dunn's clerk, that life seemed all sunshine to him.

He seemed to have crossed the threshold of a different world from the one he had left, and to his mother he wrote:

"I feel that success is before me, and that means your comfort, home happiness to both of us, dear mother."

"My income is ample for me to fit up a cozy home, and as soon as I can send for you I will, and under the name I am now known, we can forget the past and its horrors and sorrows, and those who have so wronged us can never again cross our path."

Could he who penned those lines but have had the power to read the future, could he have known what was before him, he would gladly have given up his position that promised comfort and happiness to his mother and himself, and gone again to battle with seas as a common sailor.

But it is not given us, fortunately, to read our destinies in the stars, and so we live on with hope when already the shadows of sorrow and misfortune are upon us.

CHAPTER II.

STRANGELY ALIKE.

SEVERAL years passed away, and Carl Grafton had become honored by all who knew him.

Finding that he could place every confidence in him, Mr. Dunn had given over to him the full care of his business, and trusted him implicitly.

He had increased his salary, in fact doubled it, and the result was that Carl had bought a little home for himself and mother, furnished it cozily, and the two dwelt there in perfect contentment, if not happiness, for it seemed that a shadow had fallen upon the lives of the two that it was hard to lighten.

Some haunting memory of the past seemed ever with the mother and son.

So much did Mr. Dunn think of his secretary that he was anxious to make a match between him and his daughter, now grown to be a beautiful girl of eighteen.

That Emma loved Carl Grafton there was no doubt, and yet she had never seemed to touch his heart.

One day Carl came home with a troubled look and said:

"Mother, to-day Mr. Dunn, never taking into consideration that we might not care for each other, told me that he was going to give his consent for Emma to be my wife, and he hoped that we would be married soon."

"I could not tell him that I had an ideal of womanhood which Emma did not fill, that I loved her as I would a sister, not as one I should wish to have for a wife, and I remained silent."

"This he took for acquiescence in his wishes, and said that Emma had confessed her love for me to him, and said she believed I did love her."

"He laughed at the idea and arranged it all himself, so what can I do, mother?"

"Emma is a lovely girl, Carl, a noble character, and does love you with all her heart, as I have long seen."

"She will make you a true and loving wife, my son."

"Then that means that I should marry her?"

"Yes."

"But should I not tell her of the past, mother, tell Mr. Dunn?"

"My son, we have shaken hands with the past, and after all of our misery there is no reason why we should reopen the wounds."

"Let the dead past bury its dead, my son."

"Well, mother, I am with the tide and so will I drift; but I shall tell Mr. Dunn the truth of the past."

"It is my duty to—no, no, mother, not if it causes you to suffer so."

"No, we are not the guilty ones, and Carl was distressed at the look upon his mother's face, for she had turned deathly pale and seemed to gasp for breath."

And so it was that Carl Grafton asked Emma Dunn to be his wife, and he saw when she gave her response that she really loved him, as his mother had said.

A day, six months ahead, was set for the marriage, and almost from the beginning of the engagement a change came over Carl Grafton.

He looked pale and haggard, seemed nervous, and at times strangely anxious.

And the reason?

One evening Carl had worked late, alone in the office, when he was surprised to hear the door open and see a man enter.

The door had been opened by the visitor's pass-key, and as Carl Grafton faced him he became deadly pale.

There before him stood a man almost his very counterpart.

Older he was, perhaps, by several years, if one looked closely at him, and yet he was one to be mistaken for Carl Grafton even by a friend.

He was dressed, too, as was Carl, and stood there gazing at him with a sinister smile.

"My God! I deemed you in a foreign land," gasped Carl.

"No, I am here in Philadelphia as you see, and have been for several weeks."

"And you have risked your neck to come back?"

"Oh, I am not known here, as in San Francisco, and having spent all the money I took away with me, I come to you for more."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"I neither can give you money, nor will I."

"Bah! you are to soon marry old Dunn's rich daughter, and if you will give me ten thousand dollars I will never come near you again."

"I will not give you a cent!"

"Ah! then I shall write old man Dunn that you come of a bad race, that your father is now serving a life sentence in prison for being an accomplice in a murder, the real murderer being your half-brother, your father's son by a former wife, myself for instance, and who saved himself from the gallows only by taking another life and making his escape."

"When I say that your name is Carlton Grafton, the son of the man who sought to save his fortune by forgery, then by murder and robbery, his eldest son, myself, being his accomplice, you will not marry his daughter, and have to go forth in the world to struggle once more with poverty and shame, hiding yourself under an assumed name, and seeing your mother again suffer for the necessities of life."

"Now, say you will give me ten thousand dollars after your marriage, and I'll keep silent and never see you again."

"Refuse, and I ruin you and your mother."

Like a statue stood the young man who thus had to face the horrors of the past again, a father in prison for life, a half-brother a fugitive from justice.

And in his despair he said:

"Yes, yes, three months after I am married I will give you the money you demand, if only you will never show your face again."

CHAPTER III.

THE EVIDENCE.

It was but a few weeks before the day appointed for the marriage of Emma Dunn to Carl Grafton, and a more unhappy-looking man was not to be seen than the one who was to marry the richest heiress in Philadelphia.

One morning he went to the office, and to his amazement found Mr. Dunn's attorney there with two other gentlemen.

The lawyer bowed to him coldly and said:

"I was authorized by Mr. Dunn to take charge here, and to hand you this letter."

The lawyer handed over a sealed letter which Carl took mechanically and read, while he turned to the hue of a dead man.

The letter was as follows:

"MR. CARL GRAFTON:—

"SIR:—I would not have believed the words of others regarding you, but I saw with my own eyes that you gambled last night and lost thousands in play."

"I have been told that it is a nightly occurrence, and that you lead a double life and now I believe it."

"Give into the hands of my attorney, who will hand you this letter, the keys to my safe, all my papers and articles in my office."

"Make no account, for what you have robbed me of to pay your gambling debts I will consider as nothing, as I thereby find you out as you are."

"It is needless to say that my daughter knows you also as my own eyes have discovered you to be."

RUFUS DUNN."

Twice did the young clerk read this letter, and then he obeyed the command in the letter, turned over all to the attorney, and without a word.

Then he went out of the office, stopped at the bank where he kept his own account, and drew out every dollar of his money.

His next call was upon a real estate agent to whom he said:

"I had a letter from you in which you made me a cash offer for my house?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you ready to consummate the sale at once?"

"To-day, if you wish."

"Come to my house at noon, and also be prepared to buy at what you will give, my furniture and all that is there."

"I will be on hand, sir, with deeds and money."

Going home Carl Grafton sought his mother and said:

"Mother, I am discharged from Mr. Dunn's employ, the engagement is broken between Miss Dunn and myself, I have drawn my money from the bank, sell our home and furniture to-day,

and start to-morrow for Texas, for the past has tracked us here.

"Now we must seek a spot where our lives can no longer be dogged with despair."

"My poor boy, how cruel, how bitter is your lot, and how the shadows follow us."

"I will be ready when you wish, to go where you wish, and, thank Heaven, we do not go as paupers, and can make us a new home in a new land."

The next morning mother and son were flying southward upon a fast train to seek a new haven of refuge.

The train rolled into Washington, and two men entered and glanced at the passengers.

"You are Carl Grafton, sir?" said one.

"I had not intended to answer to that name, sir, again, but I have been known as Carl Grafton the past few years," and Carl turned deadly pale.

"You are the man I want, sir."

"And for what?"

"The murder of Rufus Dunn, last night, at his house on the Delaware."

A cry had come from the lips of the stricken mother, and her son, who had risen to his feet, sunk down by her side, while he said, in a tone of horror:

"Good God! you have killed her, sir!"

"You, not I, for your crime did its work—yes, she is dead."

At once the irons were slipped upon Carl Grafton's wrists, and a physician was sent for, but his services were of no avail, for, suffering with heart trouble, the shock of the accusation against her son had snapped the thread of life.

And back to Philadelphia was taken the prisoner and the body of his mother.

Poor Mrs. Grafton was laid in her grave, while her son went to prison to be tried for his life.

The night before Rufus Dunn had been murdered in his library as he was going over his accounts and money.

He had been struck to the heart with a dagger, and his money had been taken, the murderer escaping with his booty.

Thus he had been found by the butler early in the morning, and the alarm spread like wild-fire.

Carl Grafton had been seen by the servants just at nightfall, and it was at once said that he acted from revenge, and officers of the law were put upon his track, with the result already known.

Considerable money was found on the body of his mother and in his possession, and not a soul doubted but that Carl Grafton was the murderer of old Rufus Dunn.

And in his cell paced the accused man.

Not one atom of color was in his face, his eyes were sunken, lips compressed.

Like a tiger in its cage he paced to and fro, until suddenly there fell from his lips the words:

"I will be hanged for this crime of which I am as innocent as the child unborn."

"He it was whom Mr. Dunn saw at the gambling tables, and who, finding that I had been discharged, for he had me watched day and night, went to rob the poor old man and killed him, for what was a life more or less on his guilty hands."

"And so he too is the murderer of my poor mother, the destroyer of our lives."

"And no proof have I that can clear me, nor could I find him did I wish ever so much to bring him to the gallows."

"No, no, no! there is no escape for me."

"He will go his way to commit other crimes, and I will go to the gallows!"

"No! by Heavens, no! I will not be hanged for a crime I am not guilty of; but I will live to hunt down that man and thus get revenge."

"Yes, my heart is gall now, my life blackened, my brain on fire and I will escape from these prison walls if I have to take life to do so, for why should I stay here to be hanged?"

The man's eyes burned now like living coals of fire, and his face writhed with a terrible earnestness.

The night fell, the jailer came round to see that all was well, and saw him lying upon the floor like one dead.

He opened the iron door and bent over him, to be suddenly seized with a death grip.

His throat was in a clutch he could not shake off, nor could he utter a cry.

And until limp and lifeless the jailer sunk upon the floor did Carl Grafton keep his grip upon his throat.

Then he arose, seized his hat and heavy coat from him, took up his lantern and bunch of keys and strode toward freedom.

The next day the papers teemed with the dar-

ing escape of Carl Grafton, after so injuring the keeper that all hope of his recovery was given up by the physician in charge.

And a fugitive into the world again went Carl Grafton whose wrongs had made him a fiend in human form.

CHAPTER IV.

MAD CARL.

THE scene changes from civilization in the East, to a frontier town in Texas, in the far Southwest, and at a time several years after the escape of Carl Grafton from prison, where he was charged with a murder of which he was wholly innocent.

At a table in a gambling and drinking saloon combined, were fully a hundred men, rancheros, cowboys, soldiers and Mexicans.

All were drinking, and most of them were gambling, while one man seemed to be the winner against all and every one who dared play with him.

He was a person of fine appearance, dressed in a gorgeous costume, half-Mexican, half-cowboy, and sported a watch and massive chain, a diamond ring and pin and wore a gold eagle upon his sombrero.

Where he had come from no one knew; but he had appeared in the frontier town one evening, well mounted and armed, and apparently alone, though it was afterward said that about half the Mexicans present were secretly his companions.

He looked like an American, but spoke English with a decided accent.

He gave his name as Sol Gomez, gambler at large, and announced his intention of winning all the money in the town.

That he began well in carrying out this resolve was certain, for he did not lose a game the first night he played, and, though watched by experts, who were ready and anxious to send a bullet into his heart if they could only catch him cheating, not a thing unfair in his playing could be detected.

One man who had lost heavily had hinted that one who won as he had, could only do so by sharp practice.

It was an unfortunate remark, as it cost the man his life as well as his gold, for instantly Sol Gomez demanded that he should answer for his words by fighting a duel.

The Texan willingly agreed. They stood back to back, walked apart in the saloon ten paces, wheeled and fired.

The Texan dropped dead, a bullet in the very center of his forehead whereat the gambler's position was reassured and no one ever questioned his honor.

So days went on, or rather nights, for the Mexican spent his days asleep, his nights at the gambling tables, and Senor Sol Gomez was a heavy winner.

A couple of months had he remained in the place, and then had signified his intention of departing the next morning to seek a locality where men had more money for him to win.

He had not missed winning a game that last night, and in honor of his success and his going away had treated all present in the saloon after each game.

"You are a nice lot of gentlemen, senors, but you do not know how to play cards, and as you are all broke I must go where there is gold to win, so I bid you *adios*."

As he arose from the table, pocketing his winnings and turning to the crowd bade them farewell, there was a shout near the door, a rushing to one side and the other, and a horseman dashed into the saloon with a wild yell, riding straight up to the bar while a score of voices shouted:

"Mad Carl, the Cowboy!"

"Come, Tanglefoot Dispenser, toss me a bottle of your best, and one for my horse too, for we've had a long ride."

"Gentlemen, join me, please," cried the horseman.

He was splendidly mounted, his trappings were of the best, and he was dressed like a dandy cowboy, while his form was the perfection of symmetry, and his face one to remember for its strange, weird expression, once he turned his dark, earnest eyes upon you.

It was a singularly attractive face, too—one in which there was much to dread, as well as admire.

In answer to his demand the bartender handed him a bottle, and placed the contents of another in a tin basin for his horse, while drinks were set up by the score for the crowd.

"My regards, gentlemen."

"All ready, fire!" and Mad Carl placed the bottle to his lips and allowed the fiery liquor to gurgle down his throat, while his horse drank

the contents of the tin basin with as seemingly great relish as his rider.

Having emptied the bottle Mad Carl tossed it up in the air with one hand, while with the other he drew a revolver and shivered it to pieces with a shot as it fell, scattering the glass over the heads of the crowd.

Then he leaped to the ground, amid the yell that followed, and said to his horse:

"Go to the hotel stables, Tramp, for you are drunk."

The horse wheeled and trotted out of the saloon, while Mad Carl turned and glanced over the crowd as though looking for some one, at the same time saying in a bantering tone:

"Who has got the sand to play me at a hundred a game, for I am here to win or lose all—for an orgie or a funeral, as the case may be?"

CHAPTER V.

FOR LIFE AND GOLD.

SEÑOR SOL GOMEZ had seen the entrance of the Texan, but, as though used to the wildest of scenes, had not seemed to take particular interest in him or his antics.

He had, however, resumed his seat with the remark:

"Perhaps that wild devil may have money and be willing to play. I will wait."

A man present overheard the remark, and said quickly:

"Mad Carl will play you for every dollar he has got, and then for his horse, and silver-mounted saddle and bridle."

"He'll play for all he's got except his revolvers, and don't you forget it."

"No, I won't forget it, for I'll wait and have a game with him; but, if he drinks that bottle of wine, he certainly cannot play."

"Can't he? Well, you'll see! Mad Carl can stand up under a gallon of rum."

"But who is he?"

"A cowboy from one of the ranches many miles from here. He's chief of his outfit, and they are known as the Cowboy Rangers, and good work they have done."

"The Indians and the Mexican outlaws fear Mad Carl as they do Satan, I can tell you; and men here fear him, too, for he comes to town every few months for a carousal, and he always kills somebody before its over with, while he keeps it up until he spends every dollar he's got, and sometimes has had to walk home; so if you want to play, Mister Mexican, Mad Carl is your man."

At this moment the Mad Cowboy uttered his challenge for a game of cards, and at once Senor Gomez arose and called out:

"I'll accept your challenge, Senor Cowboy, for any stake you name."

"Ah, you will? Let me have a look at you," and Mad Carl strode down the room and for the first time the Mexican now saw the face of the stranger.

It seemed to have a strange effect upon him, for he fairly shrunk back a few steps, dropped his hand upon his revolver and his face paled perceptibly.

Mad Carl's face changed too, when he saw the man before him; and such a change it was! It became really fiendish in its expression of malignancy and hate.

He, too, dropped his hand upon his revolver, but neither drew weapons, and each stood glaring at the other, the Mexican's eyes ablaze now.

That they had met before the crowd at once realized, and a hush of expectancy fell upon all.

It was a meeting of giants, as even that reckless band of men knew.

The Mexican had shown what he was on several occasions, and was looked upon as a desperate man to arouse.

What Mad Carl the Cowboy was all knew.

The silence and suspense were becoming painful when Mad Carl said in a voice strangely distinct, for the liquor he had swallowed seemed to have had no effect upon him:

"So you will accept my challenge for any stake?"

"So I said."

"I have heard of a man who was mining all the gold in town, and had proven himself a dead shot as well. They called him Sol Gomez the Mexican. Do you claim to be that man?"

"I do."

"Well, you know that I know you as you are; but as you accepted my challenge I shall name my stake."

"Name it," rejoined the Mexican calmly, but those nearest saw that his calmness was forced and his nerves on the strain.

"You have won liberally, and I have considerable money upon me, so I place all I have

against all you have, and my life against your life, as well, and one game of cards to settle it, Sir Mexican," and there was a sneer in the manner in which Carl pronounced the words:

"I am content, and I know the result, for luck has been my friend in the past, and will not desert me now," and Gomez assumed his usual free and easy manner once more, though he closely watched the effect of his words.

The reply of the cowboy was one that showed deep earnestness, and half let the attentive crowd into a secret between the two, for he said:

"As luck has not been my friend in the past—as I owe to you all the misfortune and wretchedness I have known, and as I have a life-debt to settle, I believe now that fortune will befriend me—at last."

Senor Sol Gomez uttered an impatient impression, and the Mad Cowboy said:

"As you seem impatient for the game, let us begin."

"I am ready."

They took seats at a table, every other game being off now, for the eager crowd gathered around them with the deepest interest.

"Best two in three?" suggested Sol Gomez

"No, sir, one game only."

"If you will have it so."

"One game must decide."

"And that wins all you possess, or I own?"

"It does, and more."

"What more?"

"I said that this was to be a game for our gold and our life, for if you win I shall stand at ten paces and give you a shot at me."

"If you miss, then I am to have a shot at you at the same distance."

"If I fail to kill you, it will be your turn again, and so on until one of us dies, for, Senor Sol Gomez, both of us cannot leave this saloon alive."

"Do you understand my terms now, the stakes you have to play for?"

Even that wild crowd felt a shudder thrill them at the bold and determined proposition of the Mad Cowboy.

They had known him as the most reckless of reckless men for a long while.

He was popular, yet terribly feared, for when he set out upon one of his orgies, it was certain that death would follow in his trail.

To the surprise of all, the bottle of liquor he had emptied did not seem to affect him in the least, other than to bring a flush to his darkly-bronzed cheeks, while Sol Gomez, though calm, was ashen in hue.

All eyes were turned upon the Mexican, when the Mad Cowboy had stated his terms for the game, and he said in a manner that was indifferent seemingly:

"I accepted your challenge to play, and whatever your terms I will agree to them."

"Bring a fresh pack of cards here, senor, and let the game begin and end, for I leave your town to-night."

"Yes, for a journey that will never end," was the stern response of the Mad Cowboy as he picked up the pack of cards tossed on the table by the bartender.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DUEL.

THERE was a hush upon the crowd in the large saloon that could be felt, as the cards were drawn for the deal.

The Mexican won, and he smiled as he did so, even this trifling triumph in winning the deal seeming to inspire him with a hope of ultimate success.

He dealt with a hand that was as firm as a rock, and each player picked up his cards with the look of a man who knew all that they held for him.

Slowly each play was made, the cowboy reckless in his expression, the Mexican wearing a smile that was defiant.

Suppressed muttering of those about them alone broke the stillness, and the words of the Mexican fairly resounded through the saloon as he said in a triumphant tone:

"I have won!"

"You have," was the perfectly calm response of Mad Carl the Cowboy, and he emptied his pockets of his gold and paper money, his watch, chain and ring.

"Now to see if you are the shot you claim to be," and Mad Carl arose with a manner that held no fear, a face that was emotionless.

The Mexican savagely pocketed his winnings, and then arose.

The Mad Cowboy had stepped to a position

across the room, which he had paced off from the table.

"I am ready, take your stand there at the table, and I will give you the word to fire."

Again a shudder ran through the crowd, but no voice or hand was raised to stay the tragedy that must occur within the next few minutes.

It would have been unsafe to interfere with Mad Carl the Cowboy all knew, while it was a quarrel between the men, and square as anyone could wish to see.

The Mexican smiled at the words of Mad Carl.

He still wore the triumphant, defiant smile, and took his stand like one who was glad of what he had to do.

He drew his revolver and examined it with a care that was most provoking to all who looked upon his deliberate movements.

Then he also stepped off the distance, from his position to that taken by the Mad Cowboy.

"You are right, Carl; it is just ten paces," he said.

Then he started for his position and turning asked:

"Any last commands, Carl?"

"None!" and the word was firmly uttered.

"Well, I will see you decently buried, as it is my pleasure and duty to do."

"Thank you."

"You are popular here, I see, and your funeral will be a large one, a grand blow-out in which I shall stand all the expense."

"I had hoped to get away for other fields at daybreak, but I'll not desert you until you are six feet under ground, Carl."

"You are just as kind as I will be to you—if you miss me," was the answer.

"Miss you?"

"So I said!"

"Why, I never miss!"

"There are exceptions to all rules."

"Well, this one will not be the exception."

"We shall see."

"Certainly! Good-by!" and Sol Gomez extended his hand.

The cowboy hesitated a second, and then said:

"Ah, yes; I'll shake hands with—death!"

The Mexican's hand and the cowboy's clasped, and the two looked into each other's eyes.

What Sol Gomez saw in his face, caused him to drop his gaze and turn away, and then the Mad Cowboy smiled.

As Gomez took his position the Mad Cowboy called out:

"Good-by, pard, if good-by it is, and I guess there'll be no tears shed, no prayers said, over me."

Then he threw open his coat, his hands clasp- ing the lapels, and stood ready to face the dread ordeal.

Again did the Mexican torture all by his delay. He seemed to take the pleasure a cat does in playing with a mouse before killing it.

He wanted to make the reckless, desperate but brave man before him feel all there was of death before the fatal moment came.

The cowboy did not betray the least sign of trepidation, nor did his face change from the expression which had made the Mexican wince when the two grasped hands.

At last a murmur ran through the crowd. It was ominous to Sol Gomez, and he so understood it, for the crowd would stand his dallying no longer; so he quickly raised his revolver and leveled it.

First at the head, but he shuddered at the look he met, and dropping the weapon to a level with the heart, pulled trigger.

As the shot rung out loudly in the crowded saloon, Mad Carl turned half-round and made two steps backward.

But he did not fall, and those who had believed him wounded, if not having received his death-shot, were surprised to see him advance toward the Mexican and say:

"You are not the dead shot you claimed to be, Senor Sol Gomez. Now it is my turn! Take your position," and the Mad Cowboy pointed to the position where he had stood and received the fire of the Mexican.

Then did Gomez become the hue of death itself, and he stammered:

"I won the game, and so should have another shot."

"You may—if I miss!" was the reply.

"But I claim—"

His words were drowned in an angry roar from the excited crowd.

All had seen Carl carry out his contract to the letter, and there should be no creeping out upon the part of the Mexican, though many would have been glad to have seen him kill the wild character who was such a terror in the community.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAD COWBOY'S TURN.

THE angry roar that went up from the crowd caused Sol Gomez to feel that he must not trifle with those men.

Brave as he undoubtedly was, daring as he had proven himself, he could not afford to trifle with those in the saloon, where the odds were a hundred to one against him.

How he had missed the Mad Cowboy he did not understand.

He was a dead shot, and he had felt that his aim was right at the cowboy's heart.

"After all I must be nervous," he said.

"Yes, my nerves played me an ugly trick, and his may do the same, if I have to receive the fire."

"In fact, I do not believe that he will kill me—that he would do it."

Such were the thoughts that flitted through the mind of the Mexican, and in an instant of time.

He, however, determined to make one more effort to get a shot at the cowboy, and so said:

"See here, senors, you appear to be angry with me, because I claim another shot."

The crowd answered with an ugly affirmative.

"Now I am not the man to miss my aim, and I'll wager a thousand to a hundred that Carl the Cowboy wears a steel shirt that saved him from my bullet."

All were amazed at this suggestion of the Mexican.

Shirts of woven steel they knew had been worn, and thus far Mad Carl, the Cowboy, had seemed to bear a charmed life.

And many in the fickle crowd thought that the charge of the Mexican might be a true one, and one called out:

"Search him!"

"Hang him if it is so," added another.

"Hold!"

It was Mad Carl who spoke, and he dropped his hands upon his revolvers.

"Pards, that man has no money to bet with, for if I kill him all he has is mine."

"If you think I have protected myself in any cowardly way, just wait until I have my shot at Senor Gomez yonder, and then search me."

"If I am guilty of his charge, why hang me, that is all."

This turned the tide of opinion again in favor of the cowboy, and seeing that he was losing ground Sol Gomez shouted:

"Search him now, senors!"

But the crowd were very much excited now, and Carl the cowboy's appeal had struck them as a fair one.

So voices at once arose on all sides:

"Hang the Mexican if he backs down!"

"If Carl misses him, then search him."

"Yes, and if he kills him, search him, for he hangs if he wears a steel shirt to protect him."

"Mexico, take your stand!"

"The Mad Cowboy did not back down!"

"String him up, now, if he weakens!"

Sol Gomez now saw that he had to face the ordeal.

Could he have deemed it possible he would have rushed for the door, mounted a horse and escaped.

But he knew such an attempt was useless.

The Mad Cowboy might miss him, and again it flashed across his mind:

"He will not kill me."

So he held up his hands to be heard, determined to make the best of it.

Instantly there was silence, and he said:

"Senors, I am not the man to shrink from danger, especially when I brought that danger upon myself by accepting that man's challenge."

"I shall take my stand and give him his shot."

"If he misses me, then it is my turn again, and I'll aim at his head, which is not protected."

"If he kills me, I know you will search him, and if he wears a steel shirt, will hang him and thus avenge Sol Gomez."

"Here is all my wealth, and what I won from him—see!"

He placed it on the table as he spoke and walked to the position which the Mad Cowboy had held under his fire.

The crowd was charmed by his words, and now gave him a cheer.

As for Carl the Cowboy, he walked to the table, took his place behind it and gazed at his foe.

He had not yet drawn his revolver, and now, as he looked upon the face of the Mexican there came into his eyes that same wild look of malignant hate and cruelty.

"Are you ready?" he said in almost a whisper.

"Yes, why do you not fire?" and the Mexican's voice, many thought, had a quiver in it in spite of his nerve.

A look also came into his eyes like that of a hunted stag at bay, and his lips became set like marble, and his eyes raised quickly to the face of the man who stood before him, dropped when they met the look that rested there. The Mad Cowboy was calm, but it was the calmness of deadly earnestness.

"I am ready, George Graffula, and if you dare utter a prayer do so for *your* forgiveness and mine."

There was something terribly impressive in these words of the Mad Cowboy. His recklessness was all gone now, and he spoke as though he felt every word he uttered.

What he said caused the head of the Mexican to drop, and he started, while his hands were convulsively clutched, the finger nails sinking into the palms.

Then the hands of the Mad Cowboy dropped upon his revolver butts, one on each side, and he seemed as though about to draw both weapons.

But it was from habit, as his right revolver only was drawn from his belt, and, quick as a flash it was leveled and fired.

With the crack the form of the Mexican sunk limp and in a heap upon the floor.

The bullet had crushed through his brain.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT FOLLOWED THE COWBOY'S SHOT.

LIKE a statue did Mad Carl stand for a moment after his shot; then he returned his revolver to his belt, and calling to the proprietor of the saloon, said:

"Sam, keep all this truck for me, and give that body there a decent burial for—"

He had placed his hands upon the money, when he said "truck," which had belonged to the Mexican and to himself, and his voice faltered as he went on as though to make an explanation.

But he broke off suddenly in what he was saying and appealing to the crowd said:

"Pards, it was a square game, was it not?"

"It was!" was shouted in chorus.

"And he meant to kill me?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Pards, all of you join me in a drink, for it's my treat. Then you can search me!"

The drinks were ordered, and Mad Carl, as usual, took a bottle nearly half full of liquor. He would never drink out of a glass.

"Peace to that man's ashes, pards," he said.

"Now, pards, search me, and see if I wear a shirt of steel."

He threw open his coat as he spoke, and a cry went up from the crowd.

His whole shirt on his left side, over his heart, was saturated with blood.

"You are wounded, Carl," came in a dozen voices.

"Yes, pards, he aimed true, and the bullet struck right over my heart."

"Send for a doctor, Sam, and see if I'm to die, also."

He sunk into a chair now, weak from loss of blood, and leant heavily upon the table, his eyes riveted upon the body of the Mexican, which still lay where it had fallen, though one of the men present had placed him upon his back and folded the hands upon the broad breast.

A doctor lived but a few doors away and was soon on hand.

"I've been wounded, Doc; see if I am to make a die of it," said Mad Carl, raising himself.

The shirt was torn open, and the wound was revealed.

"It is just over the heart, but the bullet glanced on the rib, and has cut its way round to the back. It is not really dangerous, though you have lost considerable blood."

"All right, Doc. I'll get you to cut the bullet out when I have said something to the boys—something that I'll feel the better for saying."

Then the cowboy rose to his feet, and, facing the crowd, said:

"Men, in me you see a man now wearing the brand of Cain. That man lying dead there is no Mexican, for he is my own brother."

A murmur of horror ran through the crowd at this confession, but, unheeding it, the cowboy continued:

"He was a bad one from his boyhood, and his dissipation ruined our home. His acts drove our father, an honest man, into crime, for he aided him in murdering and robbing one whose money could save them from ruin."

"They were discovered, and that man lying there was sentenced to the gallows and our father to prison for life."

"I, with my mother, sought a home elsewhere

and prosperity came to me, but that devil dogged us there, ruined me in the eyes of my employer, whose daughter I was to marry, killed the good old man for his money, and fled, while I, from the resemblance between us and circumstantial evidence was arrested, and I would have gone to the gallows for his crime had I not made my escape.

"The shock of my arrest killed my mother, so he was her murderer."

"To-night we met, and he lies there dead, at last."

"Sam, set drinks up for the gentlemen," and the Mad Cowboy again sunk into his seat, his words having made a deep impression upon the crowd of reckless spirits about him.

The drinks were solemnly taken and then Carl was helped to a room in the hotel next door, and the doctor extracting the bullet, the man not flinching or uttering a word under the painful operation.

The wounds were dressed, and the Mad Cowboy was told to keep his room for a couple of weeks.

The next morning the body of the dead man was buried, and all the settlement followed him to the grave, the Mad Cowboy watching the procession from his window in the hotel.

Then he had the horse of his victim put in the stable with his own, and all his traps brought to his room.

But a few days of confinement was all that his restless spirit could endure, and one night he appeared in the saloon and began his accustomed carousal.

He drank heavily, gambled recklessly, allowed no one else to treat and kept up the orgie until the proprietor told him that he had squandered all of his own and the Mexican's money—for so Sol Gomez was still spoken of.

His own and his brother's jewelry went next; then the horse and equipments of the Mexican, and at last, on the verge of delirium, penniless and desperate, he mounted his horse and rode away on the trail back to Paradise Ranch, where he was chief of the Cowboy Rangers.

Two of his comrades from the ranch, alarmed at his long stay, were coming in search of him, and he met them on the trail.

That night, as they went into camp on the prairie, distant firing was heard, and wondering at its cause, the Mad Cowboy called to his two comrades to follow, and rode like the wind in the direction from whence the sound came, for his wild spirit was eager to mingle in some scene of carnage.

CHAPTER IX.

PAWNEE BILL'S BRIDE.

A YOUNG girl was swinging lazily to and fro in a crude hammock made of barrel-staves, and swung between two large trees almost sheltering a settler's cabin in the Southwest.

The cabin was roomy and homelike, and about it was every indication of prosperity and comfort, for well-tilled fields stretched away upon either side; in the rear was prairie, land dotted with cattle, and in front a fine growth of timber, through which ran a stream with water as clear as crystal.

There were outhouses, too, built of logs, and all was kept in perfect trim.

It was the home of a well-to-do settler, and the maiden in the hammock was holding the position of teacher of a settlement school a mile down the stream, and boarding in the family of the owner of the border farm, Amos Merton.

She had dismissed her school the day before for a long vacation, as the larger children were needed to work on the farms of their parents, and in apparent rest, this calm, beautiful Sabbath afternoon, she was lazily lying in the hammock, a book in her hand, though she was not reading.

Suddenly she started as the clatter of hoofs broke the stillness of the Sabbath afternoon, and glancing down the road leading to the cabin, beheld a horseman coming at a rapid gallop toward the house.

"Oh! it is Gordon!" she cried in a voice full of pleasure, while her face flushed and eyes sparkled.

In an instant she had sprung from the hammock and hastened toward the rock where the horseman was to dismount and hitch his horse.

She was a girl scarcely eighteen, with a slender, petite but perfect figure, and a face that was full of character, intensity of feeling and frank and honest.

Her eyes were very large, almost weirdly so, and they were swept by the longest of black lashes, for she was a brunette.

She was dressed in a buckskin skirt, fringed,

beaded and worn rather short, revealing the corduroy leggings over her boots.

A corduroy jacket fitted her trim figure, and she had placed upon her head, in rising from the hammock, a broad-brimmed sombrero looped up on one side with a pin representing an Indian tomahawk and arrow crossed, and of gold.

"I am so glad you have come, Gordon, for I am really lonesome, as Mr. Merton and the family drove to the post, to church," she said in a low, musical voice.

The one she addressed was as thorough a blonde as she was a brunette.

A handsome face, blue eyes and long golden hair that fell to his waist, with buckskin leggings fringed on the outer seam, top-boots and a blue fatigue-jacket with shoulder-straps made up his picturesque attire, if we include a black sombrero encircled by a gold cord.

He was armed, of course, for in the sword-belt he wore were a pair of silver-mounted revolvers, and a red silk sash encircled his waist.

His sombrero was looped up with a pin similar to the one the maiden wore, excepting that it was of blood-red coral.

His hands were incased in gauntlet gloves, and altogether he was a very attractive looking youth, for he was scarcely over twenty-two or three.

His face was stamped on every feature with strength, a calm serenity, fearlessness and resolution, while his eyes were piercing in their brightness, yet gentle in expression in repose.

His horse was a splendid gray, with handsome army saddle and bridle, and to the horse on one side hung a lariat, while on the other was his cavalry sword, which he had detached from his belt.

"Well, May, I have come to bid you good-by for a long while," he said, with a slight tremor in his voice.

"Bid me good-by for a long while, Gordon?" she responded, while the tears came into her eyes.

"Yes; the general says the tribes bordering on Texas need watching, and I am to go there with what he is pleased to call my Indian troopers and remain for months."

"Oh, Gordon! what shall I do?"

"It is what will I do without you, May?"

"But, you will have work to do, excitement, perhaps battles with the Indians, and your Pawnees will keep you busy enough watching them as well as the red-skins, you are sent to keep in check."

"But poor me! I have no school now, and will almost die of the blues."

"May," said the young chief of Indian scouts suddenly.

"Yes, Gordon."

"You have said that you love me?"

"Can you doubt it, Gordon?"

"I will put you to the test."

"I am ready, Gordon, to be put to the test."

"I have got to depart at sunset from the fort with my Pawnees."

"Yes."

"You know that the chaplain of the fort makes his home at Settler Ducey's cabin?"

"I do."

"Meet me there at sunset, and let him make you my bride."

"Oh, Gordon!"

"I mean it, May, for I will be happier, and, if you love me, you will be, too."

"Gordon, this is so unexpected, for you know we did not propose to be married for a year yet."

"True, but I am going away upon what may turn out to be a perilous duty. If I should be killed, May, I wish you at least to bear my name."

"You can keep our marriage a secret, if you will, and perhaps it would be best, only the chaplain and Settler Ducey, knowing it."

"I have put you to the test, May—will you fail me?"

She was a woman and so she said in a spoilt way:

"You are afraid I will fall in love with some of the handsome young officers at the fort, Gordon, while you are away."

"Half of them are in love with you now, May, and I do not blame them, and you could marry rich and well if you wished, instead of Pawnee Bill, the white chief of the Pawnees, and captain of a band of Indian cavalry scouts."

"I prefer to marry Captain Gordon Lillie, of the Indian Cavalry," she said archly.

"Then you will become my bride within the next two hours."

"Yes, Gordon, I will mount my horse and go with you to Chaplain Doane now," was the young girl's assenting decision.

CHAPTER X.
THE GOVERNESS.

If Pawnee Bill rode well, May, as a woman, was fully his equal in the saddle.

Her horse was a spirited one, and she managed him splendidly, as the two dashed along the border road to the house where the chaplain of the fort made his home.

The pretty teacher had won the hearts of nearly all the young officers at the fort, and yet she had held aloof from them it seemed, for none had won her heart.

It was known that Pawnee Bill often visited the house of the settler where May lived, but that the two were engaged no one suspected.

Fort Pleasant was an outpost on the border of the Indian Territory, at the time of which I write, and it was certainly a most desirable station, situated in a delightful part of the country, and as a number of the officers had their families with them it was socially most charming.

Then there were some of the adjacent settlers who were of a class that the officers liked to meet, and among them all May had won the name of being the belle.

She was a dead shot, could ride a horse like a Comanche, throw a lasso with unerring skill and possessed other accomplishments that rendered her a very attractive little woman.

With so many dashing young officers about, Gordon Lillie, Captain of the Pawnee Scouts, had at times been fearful that he might lose his lady-love, and so, ordered off for an indefinite time, he had put her love for him to its greatest test.

She had not failed him, but was as true as steel.

So to the Ducey farm they went, and found the chaplain had just returned after service at the fort, only a short half-mile distant.

"Chaplain Doane, I have a request to make of you, sir," said Pawnee Bill in his outspoken way.

"Out with it, Lillie."

"I am ordered off, sir, for an indefinite time, and in confidence I tell you that May has been engaged to me for a long while."

"Now I may be killed, and if so, I wish to leave her my widow so that the little I have she will be able to claim."

"She has come with me for you to marry us, and yet we wish you to keep the marriage a secret until she chooses to make it known."

"Will you consent to this, Chaplain Doane?"

The chaplain looked surprised, nay more, he looked pained, and his face turned very pale.

If the truth must be told the chaplain had learned to love May himself, and one day in the future he had intended asking her to be his wife.

Now he choked back his emotion and asked, though his voice trembled:

"Is this your wish, Miss May?"

"It is, Chaplain Doane."

"You really love the man to whom you wish now to pledge yourself until death do ye part?"

"With all my heart, sir."

"Then I will do as you ask, Captain Lillie, though I must have two witnesses."

"Yes, sir, Settler Ducey and his wife."

"They will do, and keep your secret too, as you request."

The settler and his wife were called, and the chaplain, in a voice deeply impressive, and at times broken, performed the ceremony that made May the wife of Pawnee Bill.

Then the two witnesses were pledged to secrecy, Pawnee Bill bade a hasty farewell to his bride, and mounting his horse dashed away to the fort to start upon his expedition with his Pawnee soldiers, while May returned to her home wondering how it had all transpired so suddenly, that she was a young wife, and having discovered the secret of Chaplain Doane, that he loved her though he was double her age.

But then men's hearts are not always in their control, and a man who has passed two score years can love even the more intensely than when in his youth, and love too one who may be but a mere child compared with his years.

Several days after the secret ceremony the chaplain rode up to the home of Amos Merton.

May saw him coming and met him on the piazza with a pleasant welcome.

He blushed like a school-boy, when he took her hand, and then paled.

"Miss May, I have called to see you upon a matter of importance," he said.

"I am glad to see you, Chaplain Doane, whatever your errand."

"Pardon me if I have your welfare so much at heart, but I know that you are teaching here a settlement school for a few hundred a

year, while I have a letter from an old friend of mine, now a cattle-king of Texas, wishing me to secure for him a governess for his three children, a boy of fourteen, I believe, and two girls, aged respectively twelve and eight.

"He will be satisfied, he writes, with my selection, and pay her a very handsome salary, five times what you are receiving here."

"I have therefore come over to offer you the place, and to say that an army wagon-train starts northward in one week, and you can join it and catch a wagon-train of settlers from the lower country into Texas."

"Will you accept the position of governess, Miss May?"

"Gladly, sir, for it will help me to put aside some money which will come in well in the future for Gordon's home and mine; but about my being Mrs. Lillie, sir?"

"Oh, I'll refer to you simply as May Lillie, and your secret will keep unless you wish to make it known to Captain Sam Vail, my Texas friend, and whom I may say you will find to be a noble-hearted man."

"His wife I do not know, but he is not the man to wed other than a lady."

"So you will accept the position of governess, Miss May, at Paradise Ranch, for so Vail calls his home?"

"I will, sir, and I thank you most warmly for your great kindness toward me," was the answer.

Ten days after May Lillie was on her way to Paradise Ranch.

CHAPTER XI.
COMANCHES.

A WAGON-TRAIN was winding its way southward, and the guide was ahead looking for a camping-place for the night.

It was a train of settlers seeking new homes in the Lone Star State, and risking life and their all in worldly goods to find them, for the dangers of the trails were well known.

If they escaped an attack by the prowling bands of Indians, ever on the alert for scalps, they had the dread of being overmatched by the Mexican marauders always seeking booty.

The train consisted of a dozen wagons, several ambulances and some forty people, all told, two-thirds of whom were women and children.

The guide had reported seeing Indian signs about, and so was anxious to reach a camping-place where a defense could be made, and water could be had if they had to stand a siege.

All were on the alert for danger, and the men carried their rifles ready for use.

Riding slightly ahead of the train, and well-mounted, was a young girl, whose spirits were not in the least daunted by the dread of peril.

A glance into her face revealed that it was May Lillie, and she was well prepared for the long march.

Behind her saddle was a roll of blankets, and at her back was slung a small rifle, which all the train had discovered she well knew how to use.

In the belt about her waist were two revolvers, and hanging to her saddle-horn was a coiled lasso of the very best kind.

She had gone thus far upon her way to Paradise Ranch, which was to be her new home, and the train was to pass within a score of miles of her destination, it was said.

Whether May Lillie had found congenial companionship upon the trip or not, she certainly had been the life of the party, and was loved by all, especially by three or four youths of the train, who would have been more than happy to have had her accept the attentions and love they wished to shower upon her.

She would, in another day or two at furthest, reach the camp from which she would branch off to go to Paradise Ranch, and each one of her ardent admirers in the train had volunteered to be her escort there, but she had compromised by accepting them all as a body-guard, and this they were forced to be satisfied with.

The officer in command of the army train, which had met the settlers going northward, had particularly instructed the guide to see May Lillie in safety to Paradise Ranch, and he felt that he had left her in safe and good hands, as he had faithfully pledged his word to Chaplain Doane he would do.

"When we reach camp to-morrow night, I must leave these good people and enter upon my duties in my new home," she mused, as she rode along.

"I only hope I shall like the place and the family, for I am so glad to be able to surprise Gordon with a handsome sum of my own earning— Ah! the guide is coming back at a gallop."

She rode forward to meet the guide, a rough Texan borderman, with weather-beaten face and fearless mien.

"Well, Mr. Wallace, what is the matter?" she asked the guide, as he drew near.

"See heur, leetle gal, you has a heap sense, and I wants yer ter go back to ther train and tell 'em ter push on fer all they is wu'th, fer there's Injuns a-watchin' us sart'in, and we hev got ter git corraled soon as possible."

"I'll push on and mark ther camp, which will be yonder in the timber, and you jist tell 'em ter hustle themselves, fer ther Comanches is on ther trail."

"I'll do it, Mr. Wallace," said May Lillie, and wheeling her horse, she rode back at a run for the train, while Pathfinder Ben Wallace, as he was called, hastened on ahead.

"Come, hurry up the train, all of you, for the guide says we must be in camp as soon as possible, as the Comanches are now watching us from the hills."

"Come, we must move rapidly, for life is at stake."

The words of the young girl were at once heeded, the cattle were urged forward as rapidly as the drivers dared push the vehicles, those who had been walking mounted for a ride, and the train pulled out at a lively pace.

A quick push of two miles brought them to a hill which was well timbered, and along the base of which wound a small stream.

The guide had marked the place for the camp, and then gone off to reconnoiter.

The wagons were quickly placed in position in a circle, and in the center of it the ambulances formed a square, which was to be the place of the women and children, and brush and timber were piled up against the wheels to form a protection.

The cattle were given water and allowed to feed, until time to drive them into the shelter of the wagon circle, and then all began to watch for the coming of the guide.

Just before sunset he was seen coming, and with him was May Lillie.

She had taken his trail and followed him, for she was a perfect border girl and could "read signs" as well as most of the scouts.

The guide had made a complete circuit of the camp, several miles distant from it, and had been really frightened at suddenly hearing hoof-strokes behind him.

Turning he had beheld May Lillie, and she had continued on with him in his reconnoissance.

"Well, Mr. Wallace, the trails about are fresh and look suspicious," she said.

"They look devilish bad, leetle gal, and it's what I wouldn't say to no other woman, but I knows your pluck, and I tells yer we is a-goin' ter be hit hard this night," said Pathfinder Ben impressively.

"There are not many in the bands, according to the trails, unless they should unite," coolly said May Lillie.

"That's just it, unless they unites, then thar is Comanches enough ter make it uncommon interestin' fer us," was the reply of the guide.

"Well, we must beat them off, that is all."

"Leetle gal, I wishes all the men I meets had your grit. You has a leetle body ter hold so much game, but game yer is, and it does me proud to know yer."

"But now to tell ther people thet ther' is goin' ter be music this night," and the two rode into camp together.

CHAPTER XII.

THE GIRL SCOUT.

As Pathfinder Ben and May Lillie rode into camp the crowd gathered eagerly around them to hear the news.

"Folks, thar is no use a-mincin' matters, so I tells yer thet I hev diskivered all of half a dozen different trails o' Comanches."

"Some is goin' one way, some another, and they is out fer bizzness, a-s'archin' around same as ef they'd lost suthin' and kinder know'd whar ter find it."

"Now thar hain't more than from twenty ter thirty in any band 'ceptin' one, which may have fifty red-skins in it; but ef they happens ter hev seen us, and I believes they has, and j'ines forces, wal, we is goin' ter hev hot fightin' 'tween this and sun-up."

"Yer has camped well, I sees, and yet we has plenty o' time ter dig dirt, cut trees, and make ther camp stronger, and perfect ag'in' arrers and bullits, so let us set ter work at it."

"Thet's ther sittivation, folks, as Ben Wallace reads it, though I doesn't say it is allus right."

"But I say he is right, for I too have seen the Indian signs all about here, and the stronger we make the barriers of defense the more we will be

ected and the better we can beat the red-skins off," said May Lillie, in her decided way, and the people gave her a cheer.

But they lost no time in getting to work, and the sound of half a dozen axes made merry music as trees were felled and made into a barrier, while spades and shovels were kept busy too.

May Lillie really seemed to enjoy the excitement and worked as hard as any of the men, encouraging the children to lend their little aid.

At last, just at sunset, the cattle were driven into the barrier prepared for them, and the tired people sat down to supper, all except the guide and two others who moved out upon outpost duty.

The men were to sleep on their posts that night, and the children and old people were huddled off to bed early, the women, who were able to do so, standing ready to load weapons and aid in the defense as best they could.

It was a dark night, for hazy clouds obscured the stars, and a silence that could be felt soon rested upon the camp.

May Lillie had her rifle by her side, her belt of arms strapped on, and sat down upon her blanket at the outer works to listen, for she well knew how acute was her hearing, how well she could see even in the darkness.

It was not long before one of the trainmen, who had gone out on guard-duty, came in and said that the guide had sent him, and told him to say that the Comanches were not very far off.

Soon after the other trainman came in and he too had been sent by the guide.

"Pathfinder Ben says that they are coming," he reported.

Thus the time passed away, one, two hours and Pathfinder Ben did not appear.

Had harm befallen him, all wondered?

At last a form slipped out of the corral and glided away in the darkness.

"Who was that?" demanded the train captain, just then going the rounds.

"May Lillie."

"Why did you let her go?" he angrily asked the man near the spot she had left.

"She said she would go out and reconnoiter, for she felt anxious about the guide."

"The girl will be killed; you were a fool to let her go."

And with this the train captain also went beyond the barrier, disappearing in the darkness.

But he soon returned and reported seeing nothing of the guide, May Lillie or a Comanche.

Thus half an hour more passed away and suddenly a form glided toward the barrier.

"Don't shoot! it is May Lillie," came the low spoken words.

And as she sprung into the barrier she cried:

"Where is Captain Magill?"

"Here, Miss May," and he came forward.

"They have captured the guide I am sure, and are creeping up just there."

"Fire a volley at the bottom of the hill and you will find them!"

"You are a brave girl, Miss May, and I will do as you advise: but I hope they have not caught poor Ben."

"I was out on the prairie, and saw a party of them, and they came upon some one, or something, for there were suppressed voices and a struggle, and I feared it was the guide they had caught."

"Then they gathered in a group and while a number dismounted and came creeping toward the camp, the others followed on horseback."

"I'd fire now, Captain Magill."

The order was given to point at the position May Lillie pointed out, and a moment after a score of rifles flashed about as one.

Aimed at random as they were, they did good work, for the bullets fell into the very midst of the creeping Comanches and half a dozen bit the dust.

With wild yells of rage the others sprung to their feet and came on toward the timber, and those who were mounted charged forward with a rush, while a few gun-shots and showers of arrows were fired upon the camp.

Then hot and fast cracked the rifles of the trainmen, and the women loaded skillfully and rapidly the empty weapons thrown aside for others.

Revolvers rattled too, and all did good work, yet still the Comanches were not beaten back.

Standing among the brave defenders, May Lillie fired her rifle with the greatest coolness, and her daring conduct nerved the men to do their duty the more manfully.

But in spite of all, the Comanches gained ground, sending showers of arrows upon the defenders, killing one here, wounding another there and driving the cattle nearly frantic with fright.

To add to the horror and dismay of the scene the children began to scream, several of the women became hysterical and their shrieks made all a perfect pandemonium, which was added to by the wild war-cries of the Comanches.

CHAPTER XIII.

NOT COUNTING ODDS.

THE defenders of the camp seemed to feel that they were fighting a losing battle, for though the Comanches did not number a hundred braves, they yet were pressing their attack in a way that showed their determination to win.

They seemed to be aware of the force of the train, and that not more than a dozen rifles were now keeping them back, and they began to push forward with more vigor than ever.

They would rush their ponies up toward the barriers, following close on their heels, and thus gain by the death of the horses, breastworks to fight behind.

Each warrior would drop down before a dead pony and thus find shelter, while he would send his arrows at the camp.

Several of the men of the train had been killed, half a dozen more were more or less wounded, and women, too, had felt the sting of the arrows now and then.

Some of the cattle, too, had been wounded, and they were getting almost frantic with fright, hemmed in as they were.

Thus affairs were becoming desperate for the train, and there was not one hardly who did not realize that they were doomed.

But just then May Lillie called out:

"Hark!"

And all ears heard a yell so wild, so terrible, as to cause a thrill of horror to the red-skins, a thrill of joy to the defenders.

It was a wild war-cry from white lips, ringing, fierce and defiant.

And it was announced by other yells equally as terrible.

Instantly the Comanches seemed to recognize the cries, for they at once began to shout among themselves, and fly to their ponies.

One of the trainmen who lived in Texas shouted in cheery tones:

"We are saved! that is the war-cry of the Cowboy Rangers!"

A cheer broke from the brave defenders of the train, while May Lillie called out:

"Why do you not fire on the retreating Comanches, Captain Magill?"

"Just what we should do!"

"Come, men, let us press these red-skins all we can!"

The men of the train leaped the barriers, and their rifles sent the bullets flying among the now demoralized Comanches, who seemed very anxious to escape from a foe they knew but too well.

And up the hill came dashing a horseman alone, his wild war-cry ringing from his lips, while back upon the prairie it was answered once, twice.

"It is Carl, the Mad Cowboy!" cried the man who had recognized the war-cries, and he added:

"His band will make short work of the Comanches now."

And the horseman drew rein near the barrier, placed his hands to his lips and sounded a call in exact imitation of a bugle.

Hardly had the sound ceased when he uttered again and again his wild war-cries, which were answered nearer at hand.

"Stand by your posts, men, for there are but three of us. We will keep the Comanches going now that they are started."

"Come, Larry, you and Barney follow me!" and he dashed away as he and his two comrades came up at a gallop.

They wheeled and followed him down the slope to the prairie, while the train people stood gazing at each other by the light of a camp-fire hastily kindled, and almost awed by the fact that three men had come to their rescue and stampeded the Comanches, who had them almost in their power when help arrived.

"They came just in time to save us," said Captain Magill.

"And did three braver men ever live than they, for they did not count odds?" May Lillie remarked.

That the arrival of the three men had saved the train all knew, and after some further conversation upon the subject, May Lillie said:

"I have the curiosity to see the brave man who led that rescue."

"You'll see a dandy, Miss May, when you lays eyes on him," the Texan remarked.

"Who is he?"

"He is chief of the Cowboy Rangers on Captain Sam Vail's ranch."

"Why, it is to Captain Vail's ranch I am going."

"Yes, miss, and you'll find Mad Carl the Cowboy there."

"Do you mean the man who came to our rescue?"

"Yes, miss, for I knew his yell, and I saw who he was when he rode up."

"But who is he?"

"We don't know any more than that he is called Mad Carl the Cowboy, and he's the most daring and dangerous man in Texas."

"Why do they call him mad?" asked May.

"Well, miss, he gets on a spree and is then like a madman, is the only reason I know."

They could all hear now the yells of the cowboys far off on the prairie, not coming from one point, but from several different directions, which told the train people that Mad Carl and his two comrades were still pressing the Comanches and keeping up the belief that there were a number of men in pursuit of them.

Just then some distance off came a hail, and all started.

"It is Pathfinder, the guide! Go to him," cried May Lillie, and she started down the hill followed by several of the men, just as again was heard:

"Ho, folks, I'm in a fix, so come and help me."

Guided by his voice, May Lillie had reached the spot and found Pathfinder Ben lying upon the prairie bound hands and feet.

Instantly he was freed from his bonds by Captain Magill, and the party started for the camp, for Ben had an ugly gash on his head from an arrow.

"They spied me as I was watching them, and fired at me. One arrow struck me here on ther head and I was knocked out o' my senses. When I come to I were tied tight, and ther fight were goin' on. Then I heerd Mad Carl's gentle whoop and know'd he hed come jist in time ter save ther outfit."

"Mad Carl is a devil when they rouses him, but he's got as much pluck to ther squar' inch as any man I ever see, and he hev saved ther lives o' all o' us this night, and don't yer forgit it, folks."

"We never ought to," said May Lillie, in a low, earnest tone.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COWBOY ESCORT.

THE people of the train were utterly used up, and yet their joy at their escape knew no bounds.

The wound of Pathfinder Ben was tenderly dressed, his supper was given him, and he ate it with decided relish, after which he again went out to be on the watch, for he gave a very strong hint that the danger was by no means over, for the Comanches might discover how few were the rescuing party and return, or another band of marauding red-skins might happen along that way.

So there was little sleep that night for the people of the train, and old Pathfinder, in spite of his wound, kept circling around the camp all night.

The dead had been placed to one side, and covered with blankets, and the wounded were taken the best care of that it was possible to bestow upon them there.

The dead Comanches, and there were a dozen of them, were left where they had fallen, but the wounded had managed to escape in some way, as is generally the case with Indians unless they are shot all to pieces.

Those who could do so had sought rest, and thus the situation was when just as the gray of dawn began to creep over the prairie, Pathfinder Ben called out from the bottom of the slope:

"The Mad Cowboy is coming, pards."

Soon after three horsemen appeared in sight, in the misty morn, looking like grim specters, and by the side of the one in advance walked Pathfinder Ben.

It was light enough to see fairly well as they neared the camp, and Pathfinder Ben called out:

"Turn out, folks, and greet yer rescocer. This be Mad Carl the Cowboy Ranger, and these other two is his pards, and them three did the hizziness ter save us ag'in' a hundred red-skins."

"Three cheers for the Cowboy Rangers!" cried Captain Magill, and they were given with a will.

The Mad Cowboy raised his sombrero in a quiet way and gave a quick, curious glance over the crowd.

His face was haggard, his eyes sunken, and he looked like a man recovering from a severe illness, for his terrible debauch, the worst of his life, had left its impress deep upon him.

Still he was a man to see and not forget, for in his face there was a certain power that commanded respect in spite of the desperate character of the man.

At the beginning honorable, true as steel and determined to win success against all infamy upon his name, all sorrow and poverty cast upon him, Carl Grafton, as has been seen, made a bold struggle for a life of honor.

But hounded down, falsely accused, and with the gallows surely to end his days for a crime he was guiltless of, the woman he was to marry cutting loose from him, the man who had helped him, trusted him, looking upon him as a robber, his mother, the last anchor of hope stricken down in horror at the accusation against him, Carl Grafton had become a fugitive, his nature had drifted wholly into evil and he had made a very demon of himself.

The good in his nature had been crushed, the evil had triumphed, and all that was bad in his make-up exerted itself.

His meeting with the half-brother who had so wronged him, dogged him and brought destruction upon him, had culminated in his adding to his crimes that of becoming a Cain.

Then had followed his carousal, the spending of the dead man's money and his own, until almost a wreck he was on his way back to Paradise Ranch when he had daringly dashed to the rescue of the train, his two comrades blindly following his desperate lead no matter what the odds against them.

As he cast his eyes over the crowd they fell upon the face of May Lillie.

He gave a slight start, passed his hand across his eyes and forehead, as though to sweep the cobwebs away from his vision and brain, and then raising his sombrero bent low in his saddle saluting her alone.

Captain Magill spoke up and thanked him for the noble aid he and his comrades had rendered, and May Lillie, stepping forward, offered her hand, while she said softly:

"You took terrible chances, sir, with your life to save ours, and we all appreciate it, each and every one of us."

His face flushed now, and as he sprung from his saddle, he stood with uncovered head, and replied:

"We were camping, and heard the firing, so of course came to your aid."

"The Comanches thought I had my whole band of Cowboy Rangers with me, or they never would have fled."

"We scattered to encourage that belief, and so kept them moving. I am glad to have served you."

He seemed to address May Lillie rather than the others, and then accepted the invitation of Captain Magill to breakfast.

The dead were buried after the meal was over, and then learning that May Lillie's destination was Paradise Ranch, the Mad Cowboy at once offered his services to act as an escort.

"I have my own horse, sir, and a pack-animal with my traps, and I shall be glad to accept your kind offer, as it will not take any one from the train to go with me," said May.

And so it was arranged, though the young gallants of the train liked not the idea of their being "cut out" by the Mad Cowboy.

Still, the experience they had had with Comanches somewhat dampened their desire to venture far from the train, and they only hoped that May would be safe under the Cowboy escort.

Until after supper May and her escort kept on with the train, the Mad Cowboy telling her as there were signs that bands of Indians were still prowling about, it would be safer to make the ride at night.

To this May Lillie raised no objections, and with farewells and good wishes from the train people, May rode away from the camp by the side of Carl the Cowboy, whose comrades followed, leading her well-laden pack-horse.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COWBOY AT BAY.

THE Mad Cowboy to May Lillie was a quandary.

He was handsome, attractive, had a courteous manner and low pleasant way of speaking to her, and yet she had heard much of him from those who professed to know, and if their stories were true he was indeed a very devil when aroused.

He had placed himself by her side, and pushed

off on a course which he deemed safest, and he appeared to know the country perfectly.

To enliven the long, dark ride he began to talk to her in a way that showed he was well educated and had seen considerable of the world away from the frontier.

There seemed, she thought a tinge of sadness in his tone whenever he spoke of himself, and that he was imbittered with the world she was not very long in discovering.

He told her of Paradise Ranch, of Captain Vail the cattle-king and his wife and children, and many other things about her new home which May was only too glad to know.

Then he told her stories of Texas life, and she found him an excellent story-teller and very witty, until the time slipped by most pleasantly to her.

Just at midnight he halted in a piece of timber for a rest, and at once spread his blankets for her to sit upon while one of the men prepared supper.

The horses were staked out for food and rest, and the Mad Cowboy walked away upon a reconnaissance, saying to May:

"You had better take a short nap after your supper, Miss Lillie, for it is a long ride yet from here to the ranch."

He had been gone just an hour when he came rapidly back, bringing in the staked-out horses as he came.

"Pards, there is a band of Indians coming straight for this timber, so we must get away with all speed, and I only hope they will not see us. I have run the past mile to be in time to warn you."

May heard what he said and was upon her feet in an instant.

Her horse was quickly saddled, and three minutes after the arrival of the Mad Cowboy they rode out of the timber.

But the Indians were in full view then, looming up like a band of ghosts, and to escape their keen eyes the cowboys knew was impossible.

And they were right, for a yell broke from the red-skins as they saw them, and instantly the band came on in hot chase, some thirty in number.

"We must run for it now, Miss Lillie. Ride by my side and I'll steer you clear of pitfalls."

"Pards, keep close behind, unless they press us, and then I will drop back for a shot at them."

The head cowboy spoke in the coolest manner possible, and as he did so grasped the rein of May's horse and the two animals bounded away side by side at a run.

Close behind them came the other two cowboys with the pack-horse between them, and their animals were also stretched out to full speed.

But the band of pursuers were well mounted, and more, their horses appeared to be fresh, as they not only held their own but some began to gain slowly.

"We must go still faster," said Mad Carl, and he touched his spurs to his horse, while May dropped her whip upon the glossy hide of the animal she rode.

Those behind also applied the spur and the speed was increased considerably.

"They can do no better than this, and the pace is a killing one."

"Yes, Mr. Grafton, and if I am not mistaken the Indians are gaining still," May remarked, but with no alarm in her voice or manner.

"Yes, our horses are fagged, or they could drop them quickly, and their ponies are fresh, and speedy ones also."

"You fear they will overtake us then?"

"I shall give them the chance, if they continue to gain, to overtake me, Miss Lillie."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"I am armed with a repeating rifle, and shall lag behind to try its range on them."

"And what will we do?"

"Go on of course, and at a slower pace, so the horses will stand it to the ranch."

"Do you mean for us to desert you?"

"Well, no, Miss Lillie, only make your safety assured by going ahead."

"I am not one to desert a defender, Mr. Grafton, and I think we should all stand at bay."

"No, my horse is fresher than yours, for he could readily drop you behind, so that will be in my favor, my rifle is long range, and a repeater, as I said, and so I will be in no danger, comparatively."

"You must do as I say, Miss Lillie."

"It seems cowardly to allow you to face that band of Indians alone."

"No, for it is safety for all of us."

"As it is they are gaining, and would bring us all to bay, surround and perhaps capture us."

"With you ahead, and I able to keep out of their reach, they cannot surround me, and we will be able to check their pursuit."

"Barney?"

"Yes, Captain Carl."

"You ride alongside of Miss Lillie and guide her the best trails, and you, Larry, keep the led horse by your side, for I shall drop back and try my rifle upon these red fellows."

"I do so hate to see you thus risk your life, sir, alone," urged May.

"The risk is less in my doing what I do, Miss Lillie. We will meet again," and with a courteous raising of his sombrero Mad Carl, the Cowboy, dropped back, as though his horse was failing to keep up the pace with the others.

May did not exactly comprehend his reasoning, except that it was safer for her, and glanced behind her to see the Comanches approaching most dangerously near the daring man, who suddenly came to a halt, and stood at bay in the very face of his coming foes.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RUN FOR LIFE.

THE act of the Mad Cowboy had evidently caused the Indians in pursuit to believe just what he had intended it should, namely, that his horse was giving out, and he could not escape them.

They saw what they believed to be, in the darkness, a party of five or six white men, and they outnumbered them six to one.

The man who fell back in the rear they were sure of, and so wished to take him alive, hence they did not fire upon him.

But suddenly he came to a halt, his repeating-rifle went up to his shoulder, and the red flashes came from the muzzle in rapid succession until the weapon was empty.

And ponies had gone down under the cowboy's deadly aim, and riders too, for several saddles were emptied.

The Comanches came to a halt as suddenly as though they had run against a stone wall.

Then they realized the trick of their enemy, yet decided to rush upon him.

But Carl the Cowboy was off on the run again, loading as he rode along, and the shower of arrows sent after him fell short.

He did not urge his horse to full speed again, for he wished those ahead to gain a long distance, but held him back at a slow gallop.

This caused the Comanches to feel that his horse was really fagged out, and they separated on either side to get ahead and surround him with a dozen warriors, while the others went on after the other fugitives.

But as fast as those Indian flankers rode the lone horseman increased his speed and so held his position, until once more he halted suddenly, again his rifle went up to his shoulder and he fired each shot deliberately.

Braves and ponies again suffered, but they did not check their charge, and as he turned to fly again they were within range of their enemy.

One arrow clipped his shoulder, another his thigh and a third buried itself in the flank of his horse.

Mad Carl at once gave his well known war-cry, and for an instant it checked them as a volley of musketry would have done.

It told them who was their foe, for the terrible cry of the Mad Cowboy was well known.

So with answering yells of defiance confident in their numbers, they rushed on once more.

But, the momentary halt had given Mad Carl the chance to speed his horse for a few bounds and get beyond range.

He also set to work to reload his rifle, and when ready for another stand at bay glanced over the prairie to see how far ahead May Lillie and the cowboys were.

To his delight he could not see them, and he said quickly:

"She at least has escaped, and if I die in her defense it will be a better death than I deserve."

"My God! that I should meet her, the one woman whom I can love, and have her owe to me her life."

"Yes, I will save her, if I fall in doing so."

"But what will she care for me?"

"A cowboy, and one who has won the name of Mad Carl from my acts as a madman."

"What can she care for me when she has heard of me as I am?"

"Well, I am the better for knowing her, and she has changed my life, for from this day I will

try my past wild life and seek to live only to win her love.

"Great heavens! but suppose she is already in love!"

"Bah! she must forget him and love me, for she shall be mine, or Death's!"

He spoke with intense earnestness, and then as though impelled by his reckless nature, the desperate demon that was in him, he suddenly wheeled his horse, and, uttering his appalling war cries, rode back directly toward the pursuing savages, his rifle rattling as he did so.

That ringing cry was heard by the two cowboys and May Lillie, and Barney said, excitedly:

"Captain Carl has gone mad, for that yell he only utters when charging."

"Do you mean that he has turned and ridden back upon the Indians?" asked May, in alarm.

"That is about it, miss, for Mad Carl will do anything."

"But he had checked them when he stood at bay, and thus enabled us to gain such a distance."

"Yes, miss; he brought down red-skins, too, you may be sure. He's subject to mad humors and would fight a regiment, and one of them may have turned him back upon them."

"Maybe they wounded him, and that got him riled," suggested his companion.

"It was that, perhaps, pard."

"But he will surely lose his life by his desperate act, sir!"

"Well, no; somehow Mad Carl never goes under, no matter what he has been into."

"Now, we heard he was flying high once in the settlement, so went after him, and a man we met who was there told us that a Mexican gambler came in and was running the place until Mad Carl arrived."

"Then there was a challenge to Mad Carl, who played a game for gold and for life with the Mexican, and killed him, too, after which he went carousing on the money."

"He did not open his head, miss, to us about it, but the fellow who told us said that the man he killed was no Mexican, but Carl's own brother."

"His brother!" cried May in a tone of horror.

"That's what they said, miss; but see! they didn't get Mad Carl, for he is standing at bay again," and as the cowboy spoke the flashes of the rifle were again seen far back upon the prairie.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WELCOME.

As there seemed no dread of the Comanches overtaking them, with the Mad Cowboy between them and danger, the two escorts of May Lillie slackened their speed from the killing pace they had been going.

It was not long after that the flashes of the rifle could just be seen far back over the prairie, and the sound could not be heard.

So the party allowed their horses to come down to a walk, and as the firing could no longer be seen, or any pursuers, the cowboys led the way to a clump of timber for a rest.

They did all in their power to make May Lillie comfortable, and admired her pluck, though they did not have the same fear which she did that the Mad Cowboy had been slain.

"No, miss, I've always felt that poor Carl was going to be hanged, as no bullet or steel ever gets a chance at his life," said Barney.

May shuddered, yet why she could not tell, at the words of the cowboy, and having been up all the night before, in the defense of the wagon-train, she was willing to gain a little sleep, for the men said they would watch and arouse her if there was the slightest sign of danger.

An hour perhaps she slept, and then she awoke at the sound of voices.

"It's only Captain Carl, miss."

"Ah! you see him then?"

"Yes, miss, there he comes."

"And the Indians?"

"They gave up the chase."

A few moments after Carl rode up to the timber, one of the men having given him a signal of their presence there.

"Where is Miss Lillie?" he eagerly asked.

"I am here, Captain Grafton, and have just awakened from a nap."

"I am glad you have rested, Miss Lillie, for it is best that we continue on our way, as I believe that there are other bands of Comanches about."

"Pards, we must get on their trail with the Cowboy Rangers."

"But, sir, how did you keep that band of red-skins at bay single-handed?" asked May.

"It was not hard work when they learned the

range of my rifle, Miss Lillie, and that it was a repeater," modestly said Mad Carl.

"I say, Captain Carl, didn't you charge 'em once?" asked Barney.

"Yes, I got the old feeling into me for a moment, Pard Barney, and charged them."

"I think it caused them to feel that I had help at hand, and was leading them into a trap, for they pursued no further and so I followed them for awhile."

"We are ready now, Miss Lillie—"

"Permit me?" and he raised her to her saddle as though she were a child.

Then he placed himself by her side and the two rode on until the dawn came, and glancing at him May Lillie cried:

"Oh, sir, how pale you are!"

"You are wounded?"

"Mere scratches, Miss Lillie."

"And your horse is wounded?"

"It harms him no more than it does his master," was the indifferent reply.

"But you will permit me to dress the wounds for you, sir, as—"

"Do you see yonder timber, Miss Lillie?"

"Yes."

"There is Paradise Ranch, and we will be there within half an hour."

"But you appear so pale, sir, I fear you are seriously wounded?"

His face flushed for an instant and he replied bitterly:

"It is not from my wounds, Miss Lillie, but the effects of a wild carousal for weeks. I am ashamed to say it, now that I have met you; but as I have said so much I will tell you that it is my last spree, and if you redeem Mad Carl the Cowboy you will have done a noble service in coming to Texas."

"See, yonder comes your eldest pupil to meet us."

"It is Daring Dick, of whom I told you, and the pluckiest boy of his years I ever knew."

"We will be splendid friends, I know," and May Lillie turned her gaze upon a youth of fourteen who was coming toward them like the wind, mounted upon a pretty white mustang.

"How he rides!"

"Yes, and he shoots a rifle and revolver, and throws a lariat as well as he rides. He is a remarkable boy, Miss Lillie, and I wish I was a boy again so as to have you for a teacher."

In another minute the handsome boy, Dick Vail, clad in buckskin, wearing a belt of arms and with a lariat swung at his saddle-horn, dashed up to the party.

Waving his sombrero around his head, he shouted:

"Hurrah! you are our governess, ain't you, miss?"

"Yes, I am to be your new teacher, Master Dick."

"Well, I am so glad, for you are pretty, and I like you! Father was going to send to-day to hunt up the train that you were expected with, and I was going, too."

"Cracky! but you'll be welcome at the ranch!" and Dick wheeled to the other side of the young governess, and, as they rode along, he heard the story of May Lillie's adventures on the way.

"Oh, it's just like Mad Carl, miss, for he'd fight for nothing, and for you I guess he'd tackle a tribe of Indians, for I would, too!"

May blushed at the boy's words, and soon after rode up to the very commodious and pleasant home of the Vails.

Captain Vail, a thorough Texas gentleman, advanced and lifted her himself from the saddle, with a hearty welcome, and Mrs. Vail greeted her too, in the same cordial way, as did the girls, Violet, a maiden of twelve, saying sweetly:

"You'll let me kiss you, won't you?"

Such was the advent of May Lillie into the home of Samuel Vail, and as Gordon Lillie was kept away with his Pawnee Scouts far longer than he had expected, she still remained at Paradise Ranch.

And all this time Mad Carl was growing more and more in love with her, until at last the blow fell upon him, the blow of unrequited love, and transformed him into a demon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAD LOVER.

It was a pitiful story, and a tragic one, the love of Mad Carl for May Lillie.

Feeling that he had saved her life at the risk of his own, she was ever kind to him, and being told by all that her influence had "tamed the terror," she had done all in her power to lead Carl Grafton from his evil life.

All that wicked life she knew, for it had been told to her, and though she felt a horror for his crimes, she would not treat him coldly.

So it came about that Mad Carl told his love, and was refused as a matter of course.

Nay more, May Lillie told him of her life, that she was secretly married, that her husband, Pawnee Bill, had made a pledge not to reveal the marriage until he had her permission to do so, and she confessed all to him, the cowboy chief, to show him how utterly free from other than friendship her regard for him had been.

It transformed the man into a fiend; he would hear of no excuse, no reason. He loved her and no other man should claim her.

And so he disappeared from the ranch, after making a threat of revenge against her, and it was soon learned that he was lying in ambush for Pawnee Bill, then expected at Paradise Ranch to claim his bride.

May told her secret then to Dick, her boy comrade, and afterward to Captain Vail and his wife, and steps were at once taken to head off Gordon Lillie and warn him of his danger.

Buckskin Charlie, who became cowboy chief in Mad Carl's place, went out upon his trail, with Dick, while May Lillie would not be left behind.

And, in spite of all, the cunning mad lover lassoed Pawnee Bill, and, instead of killing him, carried him off to the Mexican border, along with little Dick, who also fell into his clutches.

Daring Dick slipped his bonds over his hands, his feet out of his boots, which were bound to the stirrups, and slid off of his pony in the darkness, thus making his escape; but Pawnee Bill was carried on to the den of the Mad Cowboy, who, knowing the country thoroughly, had decided just where he would carry his prisoner, and, by torturing him, bring revenge upon May Lillie.

Captain Vail, Buckskin Charlie and the Cowboy Rangers followed hot on the trail of the daring kidnapper, and tracked him to the Rio Grande.

Unable to remain idle while her lover was a prisoner of the man whom she now feared and hated, May Lillie followed the trail of the cowboys, and while they had gone into camp to await the dawn, she came face to face with Mad Carl, and, quick as a flash she had lassoed him.

Her horse bounding away, she had dragged him from the saddle with stunning force, while his shot, fired at his foe in the shadow of the mesquites, and whom he did not know in the darkness, brought Buckskin Charlie and his Rangers to the rescue, to behold that she whom they had named the Queen of the Lariat, had been the one to capture Mad Carl.

It would have ended then and there, for the cowboys sought to string him up, but the brave girl now felt that the man was mad indeed—that his brain was crazed, and she protected him; and when Pawnee Bill was found, safe and unharmed, she demanded of Captain Vail that the prisoner be taken to an asylum and incarcerated.

"No, no; he is a madman, and it would be a crime equaling his own deeds to put to death one who was not responsible for his acts," she had urged.

And so it was that Mad Carl, strongly guarded, was carried to the asylum, while back to Paradise Ranch went May Lillie, the husband whom she had rescued and the cowboy escort.

After a few weeks' visit at Paradise Ranch, Pawnee Bill was forced to take his leave and return to his command, May deciding to remain as governess of the Vail children at the earnest entreaty of the whole family, until Captain Gordon Lillie should serve out his term of enlistment as scout for the army, which would be in a few months, and then return to take his young wife to the home he was building for her in the Indian Territory.

So Pawnee Bill started upon his return, and May and Dick were to be his escorts as far as the Mountain Pass, the spot where Mad Carl had lain in ambush for him, and lassoed him on his way to Paradise Ranch.

At the pass they parted, Gordon Lillie saying:

"A few months more, May, and I will come to take you to your own frontier home."

"I will be ready and glad to go, Gordon, and now you are released from your pledge, and can tell the secret of our marriage at the fort," she said.

"Yes, and I have some curiosity to see how some of those young officers will look when they hear the news."

"But I can be generous and give them my sympathy, May, as I am the one who won the prize."

Farewells were said, and Pawnee Bill went on his way, while May Lillie returned toward the

ranch with Daring Dick, who exerted himself all he could to cheer her.

As they moved along the trail leading from the foot-hills to the prairie, they saw a horseman coming toward them at a gallop.

He was dressed in the garb of an old trapper, and had long gray hair and beard.

His horse was gaunt yet looked like a good animal, and he carried a long rifle across his saddle.

As he drew near he came to a halt and said with a strong dialect of the border camps:

"Yer sarvent, miss; but has yer see a gent on a critter goin' ther way I is p'inted?"

"I just parted, sir, a few miles back, from my husband, Pawnee Bill, if he is the one you seek?"

"He's ther man, miss, Cap'n Gordon Lillie, and I were sent arter him frum ther fort, fer he are needed and needed bad by ther ginerel."

"Has anything gone wrong, sir?"

"Notbin' more'n thet ther red varmints is raisin' Cain ag'in, and ther ginerel wants ther cap'n and his Pawnees fer ther trail."

"Well, sir, you will overtake him in the right hand trail, after you go through the pass, for that is the one he will take."

"I am glad he will have company, sir, and please say to him that you met us."

"I will, miss, and I bids you good-day."

With this the old man went on his way, and May and Dick rode on in silence for some time, which the latter at last broke with the remark:

"Miss May, that old man looked enough like Mad Carl to be his father."

The suggestion was a startling one to May Lillie, and in spite of herself she could not but worry over the boy's words.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STRANGE SUSPICION.

It was no use for May Lillie to try and disguise her feelings, for she was anxious beyond all doubt and showed it.

At last she asked:

"Dick, what made you think that old man looked like Mad Carl the Cowboy?"

"Well, Miss May, I was reminded of Mad Carl the moment I saw him."

"His size was the same, and his eyes had a look I have seen in Carl's, while somehow his voice sounded like the Mad Cowboy Chief."

"Dick!"

"Yes, Miss May."

"I believe you are right. I cannot help now but remember how much he reminded me of Carl."

"Could Mad Carl have escaped from the asylum?"

"Oh, Miss May!"

"It is possible, for you know what a desperate man he is."

"Yes, he's desperate enough."

"And can the man have been Mad Carl?"

"Miss May, you make me laugh. Why, Mad Carl was a young man and that one had gray hair and beard."

"He might be disguised, Dick."

"That's so, Miss May, I never thought of that; but I guess I only fancied the likeness."

"No, it was there, in the man's face, form and manner."

"He can't be Mad Carl, that is certain, Miss May."

"I sincerely hope not, Dick; but let us ride on more rapidly to the ranch."

And they put their horses to a gallop and as the ranch came in sight, Dick said:

"I'm going to branch off, Miss May, to the cowboys' camp, for you will excuse me, won't you?"

"Certainly, Dick, and when you return I'll tell you what your father thought of the old man we met, for of course he was at the ranch to see Gordon, arriving there after we left."

"Yes, Miss May," and Dick went on his way along the trail leading to the camp of the cowboys, two miles distant from the ranch.

Upon arriving at the cowboy camps, Dick found only two of the men present; one of them was just recovering from an attack of illness, and the other had charge of the cattle.

"Sandy, where is Captain Buckskin Charlie?"

"He went with the whole outfit excepting us, Dick, to the lowlands after the new cattle the captain bought."

"When will they be back?"

"To-night, I reckon."

Dick frowned with evident ill humor, but said:

"I say, Sandy, can you go with me on a trail?"

"I cannot leave, Dick, as there is no one here but me."

"Well, Sandy, after supper to-night I want you to ride over to the ranch and tell father that I have gone off on the trail of the old man who came to the ranch to-day after Captain Lillie."

"Tell him I wish to find out when he joined the captain and if they went on together, and will be back, I reckon, to-morrow night."

"You hain't going alone, Dick?"

"Oh, yes, as I can find none of the boys."

"It's risky."

"Well, if any of the boys come in, send them on my trail straight to the pass."

"Now, I want a bag of provisions and the very best horse you have here, for mine has had a long ride of it already."

Dick's word was law, for he was loved by all the cowboys, and they knew he was not one to go off on a foolish errand, or give unnecessary trouble.

So Sandy got the best horse in the outfit, as he said, a large, long-bodied sorrel, gaunt as a hound, and one that it was said was good for a gallop of fifty miles on a stretch.

"He won't know he's carrying a load, Dick, and here's some rations already cooked for the boys."

"Don't be rash, and luck to you."

With this Sandy let go of the rein, and the sorrel went off like an arrow.

"I have just three hours to reach the pass before sunset, and you must get there, old horse," he said.

The animal seemed to understand what was said to him, and went into a long, swinging lope, that would put behind him ten miles to the hour.

The sun was yet half an hour high when the boy reached the spot where they had met the courier, who said he had been sent after Pawnee Bill.

The trail was examined closely, the horse thereby being given a temporary rest, and some water, and mounting again, Daring Dick set off at a swifter pace than before for the pass.

"You must do your best, old horse, for when it is dark you can rest," he said, and the animal ran along as though he had not already come a long way.

Through the pass Dick went, halting at the spot where they had parted with Pawnee Bill, and thence he went on the trail to the right, for there were the tracks of the young white chief's horse.

And more, there was the trail of the animal ridden by the army courier.

"He was riding rapidly and must have overtaken Captain Lillie a few miles from here."

"Yes, the captain's horse was going slow, and here the old man's horse was on a dead run," said Dick, reading the trail with the skill of an old scout.

So on the good mule went, seeming to understand that his young rider had a discovery to make before night, and the shadows were already beginning to fall across the trail.

"There goes the sun."

"Now, old horse, if we don't find where the old man overtook Pawnee Bill before dark sets in, we'll have to camp for the night, and that will be bad, as it will give a great deal of time for mischief, if any has been done, and the more I think of it, the more I feel sure that it was Mad Carl we met."

And on the gallant horse, with his daring young rider went at a run, while the shadows deepened each moment.

Then the trail turned into a valley, and the tracks could hardly be seen, yet Dick discovered that those of the old man were no longer made by a horse on a run.

"He has come in sight of Pawnee Bill and slackened his pace."

"And now I can see no more," and Dick was all broken up with his distress.

"It's a shame, for if I had fifteen minutes more of daylight I could reach the place where the old man overtook him, and the tracks would tell what happened."

"Well, I must camp for the night, that's certain."

And with this Dick sought a good camping-place near the trail.

CHAPTER XX.

DICK'S DISCOVERY.

DARING DICK was of a philosophical turn of mind, so, as he could do nothing more that night in the way of discovering the situation, he did not, no matter how great his anxiety, lose his sleep.

He sought a secluded spot on the banks of a small stream, and staked out his horse.

Then he built a fire among the rocks, so that it

could not be seen from any distance off, spread his blankets for a bed.

His next move was to open his bag of provisions and broil some meat on the end of a stick, toast a cracker and make a tin cup of coffee.

Having satisfied his hunger, for a boy is always hungry, he led his horse to the brook to drink, changed his feeding-place, and rolling up in his blankets was soon fast asleep.

But he had his mind on the work before him, and awoke promptly an hour before dawn.

The fire was rekindled, the coffee made, meat broiled and his breakfast eaten with dispatch.

Then his blankets were rolled up and tied at the back of his saddle, and the horse given a good rubbing down.

The animal seemed as fresh as before starting on his long gallop of the day before, and it was just growing light when Dick rode into the trail at the point he had left it the night before.

He was ready to begin work with the first possibility of seeing the trail.

He now saw the tracks, and then followed them to where they met, the old man having evidently overtaken Pawnee Bill.

The trail there showed that Pawnee Bill had come to a halt, then turned his horse and awaited the coming of the old man.

The tracks of the two horses were there, side by side, and then Dick uttered a cry of alarm as he beheld red stains upon the ground, while the tracks showed that the two horses had been suddenly moved about in a short space.

There was a mark upon the soft earth, as though a form had fallen there, and then been dragged to one side.

There were the tracks, too, of a man with a high heel, and spurs, the latter having indented the ground here and there.

There was another track, too, made by a smaller foot, and Dick read this to mean that if Pawnee Bill had been taken at disadvantage and captured, he was not killed, though he might be wounded.

Then Dick saw where the two men had mounted their horses, and this trail branched straight off from the one they had been following.

"This looks awful bad."

"But I'll see where the trails lead."

"If I could only have made this discovery last night, I could have gone back to the ranch and had the Cowboy Rangers here by this time to follow where this leads."

"Something has gone wrong, that is certain, and I guess that old man was none other than Mad Carl."

"Miss May should have let the cowboys hang him when they wanted to do so; but then Captain Lillie also said it would be a crime to hang a crazy man."

"Now, old horse, we must follow this trail, and if it leads toward Mexico, then you have got to do the best running you ever did in your life before, for back to the ranch we go after help."

"If Mad Carl has escaped, and has got Captain Lillie again in his power, there is no telling what he will not do."

So Dick followed the trail, and saw that the horses had been urged to a canter.

"He's in a hurry," he muttered.

The trail wound around, back toward the pass, and, to Dick's joy, came out there, and, going through the canyon, it branched short off to the right, toward the Rio Grande.

There had been an effort to cover up the trails, there, but it had been hurriedly done, and yet would have thrown one off had he not, as the daring boy had, followed it from the starting point.

"There is no need to go to the place miles on ahead, for work begins right here. He had to come through the pass, or cross the range, so this was his easiest way."

"Now, sorrel, you go to the ranch as you never went before, for if I kill you it will be in a good cause."

With this Dick started the sorrel off on a rapid run, straight as the bird flies for Paradise Ranch.

The gallant horse never failed him, and though foaming and feeling the hard run, held his gait and dashed up to the ranch just at noon, to discover Buckskin Charlie, at the head of his Cowboy Rangers, to the number of ten, ready for the trail.

May Lillie's horse also was there, and Captain Vail's, and it was evident they were to start upon a journey.

The coming of Dick had been seen, and, as he sprang from his panting horse the cowboys gave him a cheer, while the family met him upon the piazza, the captain and May Lillie ready for their ride.

"Dick, what news have you, for Miss is terribly fearful that the man you met yesterday was Mad Carl," said Captain Vail.

"If I can read signs, he was, father."

"Hal you followed the trail then?"

"Yes, sir, and night shut me out just as I reached the spot where the old man overtook Captain Lillie."

"It was no use looking, for I am neither an owl nor a cat; so I had to camp until morning."

"I went to work at dawn, and saw that there had been trouble, from the tracks in the trail, and—"

"The man was Mad Carl; but, did you see any signs that he had taken the life of my husband?" and May spoke with a strange calmness, though her eyes were ablaze with suppressed feeling.

"There were red stains on the ground, Miss May, but I saw Captain Lillie's boot-tracks afterward, so he was not killed."

"Then the trails of the two horses branched off and made a circuit through the pass."

"There they were half-covered up, and branched short off for the Rio Grande trail."

"Ho, men, to saddle!" cried Captain Vail, while May Lillie, the Lariat Queen cried:

"Now I vow to follow this trail to the end of Mad Carl's life!"

Waiting until brave Dick had secured a fresh horse, for he would not be left behind, the party started to solve the mystery of the boy's discoveries.

CHAPTER XXI.

NUMBER NINE.

In what was known as the Tomb, in a State Institution for the Insane, in the State of Texas, a man was pacing to and fro, his hands crossed behind his back, his head bent low, his lips firmly compressed.

His hair was long and white, his beard, of several weeks growth had turned to an iron gray, and this within less than a month of time, for his face showed that he was a young man, still in the twenties.

His form was a splendid one, and his face, but for its haggard look, would have been called strangely handsome.

The man was clad in buckskin, moccasins and all, and wore his hat, a sombrero.

"The Tomb" was so called as it was where the "incurables" were placed for safe-keeping.

The man was Mad Carl the Cowboy, known in the asylum as "Number Nine."

He had been brought to the asylum in irons by his comrades, and when incarcerated, his fame was such that the keepers in terrible fear had at once placed him in the cell known as The Tomb.

It was on a wing of the institution, apart from the other cells, and had in it only an iron bed, chair and washstand.

The one window was trebly grated, and the door was double, the outer one of iron, another of iron bars.

Escape, even for such a man, from that cell seemed not to be considered possible.

But, since his coming there not a harsh word had the Mad Cowboy uttered. He was courteous to his keepers, gentle as a woman to all. Not a complaint did he make, and he only spoke when addressed, and then seemed perfectly rational.

He had the peculiarity of always wearing his hat, and hanging at his belt where his revolvers had been, was his lasso, of which he was an acknowledged king.

This he had begged not to have taken from him, and the keepers had yielded to his humor.

But, they had noted, that, in spite of his quiet mien, and seeming freedom from suffering, his long dark hair had rapidly whitened, and his growing beard had come forth gray.

If he ever slept no one had discovered the fact, for he was always on the alert, always pacing the floor of his cell when his meals were brought, or the keeper looked in upon him.

There was a storm brewing, when he is brought to the notice of the reader, and as the rumble of thunder came to his ears he stepped quickly to the door and looked through the bars.

It was the sunset hour, and the clouds were looming up black and threatening.

"Yes, to-night, to-night!" he muttered, and then he began to pace to and fro again.

His supper was brought to him, and he ate heartily, thanking the attendant in a pleasant way.

Night came on and with it the rain.

At last he saw the flickering of a lamp.

"It is the night-watch on his last rounds."

"He will close the outer door of iron and I will be shut in," he muttered.

The man came nearer, swinging his lantern and enveloped in heavy storm-coat.

"Good-evening, sir," said the madman as the watch peered into the grating, flashing his light within.

"Good-night, Carl," was the reply, and as the words were uttered his throat was seized in a grip that shut off all cries for help.

Then, with one hand holding the watchman hard against the bars, he with the other seized the light and set it down, while he quickly drew the man closer to him.

"You must die, watchman, for you alone stand between me and liberty—you alone stand between me and my revenge! You have been good to me, but you must die," and the madman kept his grip upon the throat until he knew that the watchman was beyond all power of resistance.

Then, clutching him through the iron bars, he lowered the limp form to the floor, and, drawing his victim close, unbuckled his belt and pulled off the ring with the bunch of keys attached.

He quickly found the one that unlocked his iron gate. It quickly opened, and then he dragged the watchman within, tore off his storm-coat and hat, and put them on himself.

Seizing the lantern he stepped out of the cell, locked the iron gate, then the door without, and strode across the paved courtyard, between the buildings.

A high wall surrounded the grounds, but what did he care for that?

He was free! and he intended not to be retaken, alive.

He passed the other watchman going his rounds, and whirled his lantern to show that all was well, as he had noted them do from his windows time and again.

The pouring rain kept all within doors, and he met no one as he walked toward the stables.

He found the key marked "stable," unlocked the door and passed inside.

There he selected the best horse, saddled and bridled him, opened the door leading into a lane, and, putting out his lantern, mounted and rode away.

Once free of the lane he dashed along at a furious speed, unmindful of the storm.

The horse was shown no mercy, and miles were thrown behind in the rapid run.

At last lights twinkled ahead, and, an hour before dawn, he rode up to a tavern in a small village.

He seemed to know his way well, and his man, too, for he called the landlord up by name, and was admitted into the tavern.

Half an hour after a horseman rode away from the tavern stables.

It was the Mad Cowboy, the escaped lunatic, and he was mounted upon a fresh horse.

And this animal also was pressed to his utmost endurance, driven through the pitiless storm.

Dawn came, but the mad horseman still continued his way, and only when his tired horse could go no further, did he ride up to a farmhouse and seek another animal.

"My son is dying, sir, and I am hastening to his side. Will you sell me a good horse, or take my animal in exchange, for he is a fine one, only dead beat, just now?"

So said the man whose gray locks caused him to look fifty years of age.

"I will give you a horse, sir, in exchange for yours, and meanwhile my wife will give you something to eat, for you look tired and ill," said the hospitable farmer.

"I am both, sir, but I have no time to stop, so will be on my way."

And mounting the fresh horse, a good one, the Mad Cowboy once more resumed his untiring flight, while he muttered grimly:

"The Tomb did not hold Madman Number Nine."

CHAPTER XXII.

ON THE TRACK OF REVENGE.

SOME days after the escape of Mad Carl from the asylum, a man rode up to a camp of cowboys, who were herding a large number of cattle upon the prairies.

He was well mounted, and well dressed, and one would have scarcely recognized in him the buckskin-clad cowboy who had escaped so daringly from the asylum, for his face was clean-shaven and looked no longer haggard and wild.

His white hair was still worn long, and at a glance he looked like a man verging on three-score years; but one who closely observed him would have said that he was a young man.

The cowboys, ever hospitable, gave him a welcome, and he glanced eagerly over the faces of all to see if he recognized any of them.

Several countenances looked familiar, but they did not appear to recognize in the gray-haired stranger Mad Carl, whom they had several times met.

He enjoyed his supper and told his hosts that he was seeking the ranch of Captain Vail, who was a dear friend of his.

"It lies a hundred miles from here, pard, away up to the northwest and over toward the Rio Grande, but just where, I do not know," said one.

Others could give no better directions, and he said he guessed he could find it, and he was in no hurry.

"You'll get lost if you hain't a plainsman," said one.

"I have seen service on the plains, my friend, and have no fear of being lost," was the reply.

"Well, you must look out for Injins and Mexican raiders, for they are constantly laying in wait for game."

"I'll be cautious," was the answer, and picking up a guitar belonging to one of the cowboys he ran his fingers across the strings and then, at the quick entreaty of those about him, who saw that he was a musician, began to play.

The "Spanish Mandango," "La Palerna" and other pieces were played with a skill that won the admiration of the cowboys, one of whom asked him if he sung.

In response he sung in a superb voice, that always went to the heart, the ballad known as "Those Dark Eyes," and which he had often sung at Paradise to May Lillie, for it was her favorite.

"Waal, pard, you kin sing sweet as a mocking bird, and I has heard the wild man they called Mad Carl the Cowboy sing that very song," said one of the men.

"Did you know Mad Carl?" was the quiet query.

"Waal I know'd him, and I didn't."

"I were at the upper settlement the night he kilt Sol Gomez, who proved to be his brother, and the spree he went on arterwards jist made ther country howl."

"Thar was plenty o' men died with ther boots on, in that racket, for Mad Carl were on the war-path ter kill, and all ther scrimmages he c'd git gerloots inter, why he did, while he spent money like a cattle-king."

"I tell yer, pards, it were a killin' pace he kept up them few weeks, and he wounded too."

"Then one mornin', he were missin', and ther next I heerd o' him were that he had been put in ther lunatic asylum as a crazy man, an' I reckons them as put him thar know'd."

"You has heerd o' Mad Carl, stranger pard?"

"Oh yes, I know him well, and I saw him in the asylum just a few days ago."

"He is blood kin to me, I may say; but if men knew all he had suffered they might not wonder that he was mad," the stranger said with a tone of sadness in his voice.

"Waal, now I looks at yer I does see a resemblance ter Mad Carl, and I guesses if yer is kin ter him yer hain't afeerd to hunt Paradise Ranch alone, for ef he had any scare in him nobody ever found it out."

Saying that he was tired the stranger sung another song for the boys, and then wrapping his blankets about him laid down to rest.

The men silently followed his example, impressed by the sympathetic voice of the stranger, and also regarding him with increased respect since he was "blood kin ter Mad Carl the Cowboy, and no slouch himself" as one of the boys expressed it.

After an early breakfast the stranger mounted his horse and rode away, followed by hearty good wishes from his cowboy hosts.

That night he camped alone, and the next, and when he arose the second morning after leaving the cowboy camp, he unrolled a large pack he carried strapped behind his saddle.

There was a small looking-glass, a gray beard skillfully made and looking as perfect as a real one, a bundle of clothing, leggins of buckskin and hunting shirt, with a belt of arms, a slouch hat, old pair of boots and spurs, all considerably worn, as though having seen considerable use.

His other things were rolled up in a package and those he had taken out were donned, the false beard, with the aid of the looking-glass, being skillfully put on, his hair being rumpled and pulled over his ears to hide the sides of his face where the fraudulent whiskers might be detected.

Then he mounted his horse and went on his way.

Though asking his way of the cowboys he had never hesitated once, seeming to know the country perfectly.

It was an hour after sunrise that he rode up to Paradise Ranch.

Pretty Violet Vail was upon the piazza and greeted him with a kind word of welcome, while she said:

"Dismount, sir, and come in, for papa and mamma will be glad to see you."

"I am here to find Pawnee Bill, leetle gal."

"He's chief o' the Pawnee Scouts, and ther general hev sent me ter hev him come right back as thar is work ahead fer him."

"Captain Lillie, whom you call Pawnee Bill, sir, left here at dawn on his return to the army, and his wife and my brother Dick escorted him as far as the pass in the upper range."

"Father is over at the cowboy camp, sir, but mother is here and will be glad to have you come in and stay to dinner at least."

"No, leetle gal, I've got ter overtake Pawnee Bill, fer he's ter hurry on at all speed."

"I thank, you all ther same, and says ter yer good-by."

He turned as he spoke and wheeling his horse rode away without asking the trail that Pawnee Bill had taken.

"Now I am on the trail of revenge, and Pawnee Bill shall be my prisoner before another sun rises."

"If I am mad there is method in my madness, and the method is revenge," and the cowboy avenger of wrongs he had brought upon himself laughed in a bitter way that was painful to hear.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MISTAKEN CONFIDENCE.

PAWNEE BILL rode on his way, after parting from May and Daring Dick, building castles in the air, or rather a cabin in the new home he had selected to dwell in with his young wife.

His term of captain of Pawnee Scouts would expire in a few months, and he was willing to give up his perilous life for one in his own home.

So he rode on his way, building up future hopes.

He had nearly lost his life, when taken by the Mad Cowboy, and yet he had been the one to say with May that no harm should befall one who was not of sound mind, for that Carl was indeed mad he had not the slightest doubt.

The man had made him prisoner as he had avowed to him, to get his revenge upon May by torturing the man she loved.

He had left him in a secret lair, known to him alone, and had gone to gather a band of Mexican outlaws whom he had known in the past, and with them to make the name of Mad Carl still more terrible.

He had been gone but a short while before Gordon Lillie had managed to free himself, and then, knowing no fear, he had boldly sat down to await the return of the cowboy and his outlaws, determined to give them a surprise that would win victory for himself.

Instead had come Buckskin Charlie and his men, for when leaving the retreat Mad Carl had been lassoed by the Queen of the Lariat, who had gone to her husband's rescue.

All these things did Pawnee Bill ponder over, as he rode along, and he mused aloud:

"She is the sweetest and bravest little woman alive."

He was going through a heavily timbered valley, his horse in a walk, a couple of hours after parting with May and Dick, when he heard a hail from behind.

Quickly he turned, expecting that May had forgotten something and so had overtaken him.

"Ho, Pawnee Bill!" came the cry, and he saw a horseman coming at a gallop and waving his hat for him to stop.

He saw that the man had white hair and beard, was dressed as a frontiersman, and in fact was a typical army scout.

"Who is he?" he muttered, and he drew rein and waited for the stranger, though he kept his hand conveniently near his revolver in case it should be a foe instead of a friend.

In a short while he rode up, his horse panting from a hard run, and he called out:

"I say, Pard Pawnee Bill, I has been on ther chase fer yer, as I didn't find yer at Paradise Ranch."

"Well, my friend, how can I serve you?"

"Does yer know Jack Brace, Old Buckskin, rather?"

"I have never met him but have often heard of an old army scout by that name."

"Waal yer knows him now, for I do be Old Buckskin, and I are on your trail, Pard Pawnee."

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Brace: but how can I serve you?"

"Not a bit, but it's ther general wants yer, and he sent me ter hunt yer up, as he said yer were down in Texas somewhar courtin' a pretty gal, and he had yer dead ter rights, Pard Pawnee, fer I met ther sweetest leetle petticoat back yonder that ever I sot my villainous old eyes onter."

"She was with her brother, and they told me the trail yer hed tuck."

"Pard Pawnee Bill, I is proud ter meet yer," and the man extended his hand.

"So General Carr has sent after me, has he?"

"Yas, I were ordered down from Utah ter his command, as I knowed ther country prime, and he told me ter come arter you as he hes got work fer yer."

"I went down by ther river trail, and reached ther ranch soon arter yer hed levanted, so I come on yer track."

"Well, I am glad of your company, Old Buckskin, for the remainder of the trail, for I expected a long and lonely ride," and Pawnee Bill rode on, not a shadow of suspicion in his mind that he was welcoming the worst foe he and May had in the wide world.

And all the while as they rode along the Mad Cowboy was watching his chance to strike.

He did not wish to kill him—ch, no!

That would have been easy enough, as Pawnee Bill suspected no treachery from the cut-throat by his side.

He had heard of Old Buckskin often, as a strange character, but perfect scout and deadly foe of the Indians, and that the man was any other he did not for an instant suspect.

Mad Carl knew that he had a dangerous man to deal with.

Did he make a mistake, Pawnee Bill was one to take quick advantage, and he knew all that he was worth as a foe and in a deadly encounter.

To kill him would be to deprive himself of the slow revenge he had determined upon.

If May Lillie could not love him, then she should know what it was, all the misery and sorrow it was to refuse his love. As Pawnee Bill was the man that stood between Mad Carl and his love, then he should know all the misery there was in being his rival.

May Lillie was his idol, and he mistook her gratitude and friendship for love.

As she had not accepted his affection, then she aroused the Satan in his heart.

He had reformed his life for her, and when he lost her he had dropped back to a worse condition than ever before, bad as that was.

Such was Mad Carl's unreasonable reasoning, and now he had his rival in his power, wholly unsuspecting danger.

It was mistaken confidence on Pawnee Bill's part, and it was to cost him dear.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PRISONER OF A MADMAN.

THE Mad Cowboy was only watching his chance to strike, but not kill his victim.

It soon came, and attracting the attention of Pawnee Bill to a distant hill-top, as the scout turned his head, the revolver barrel of the madman fell quickly upon him.

The blow was a stunning one, and Pawnee Bill dropped from his saddle as though his life had been taken.

In an instant the Mad Cowboy had dismounted, and, slipping from his pockets a pair of steel manacles, he clasped them upon the wrists of his victim, then unbuckled his belt of arms, searched him for any concealed weapon, and then set to work to revive him.

But for the heavy hat worn by Pawnee Bill the blow might have fractured his skull, for the Mad Cowboy had hit harder than he had intended.

As it was he had cut the scalp to the bone, and with the greatest coolness drew the wound together with adhesive plaster, making a very neat operation of it.

Then he bathed his face with water brought in his canteen from a brook near, forced some liquor between his lips, and smiled in a sardonic way as he saw the scout reviving.

When Pawnee Bill opened his eyes he met those of the Mad Cowboy.

He looked bewildered and said:

"Did my head strike a limb, and was I thrown from my saddle, pard?"

"Your head was struck by my revolver, and you fell from your saddle."

"Hal trapped again!" and Pawnee Bill now realized that his wrists were manacled.

"Yas, brave as you are, and clever, you have been trapped again, Pawnee Bill."

"You are—"

"A madman, the cunning of whom is verbal, Pawnee Bill. You know me, now?"

"Oh, yes, you are one whom I saved from being banged by Buckskin Charlie and his Cowboy Rangers, because you were mad."

"You are not responsible, my dear fellow, and I forgive you," was the cool reply of the young White Chief of Pawnees* who betrayed not the least uneasiness at his peril, whatever he might feel.

"I remember; you and *your wife* both saved me because I was mad; but, that does not soften me toward you in the slightest degree."

"I lived for revenge, I plotted escape from the asylum to get it, and that I mean to strike a bitter blow you can understand when I tell you that I met *your wife* and did not seek to harm her, as I intended she should suffer misery more than death."

"You are once more my prisoner, Pawnee Bill, and this time there is no escape for you."

"I doubt it," was the plucky response.

"Well, you shall see. No one suspects you of being in my power. I shall take you across the Rio Grande and carry out the plan I had in view before, but was thwarted in consummating by *your wife's* interference."

Each time he referred to May Lillie he emphasized the *your wife*.

"You see, I once was allied with a herd of Mexican outlaws, and I'll go back to them. If they have a chief I will have it out with him."

"Then I shall lead the band against the Texans, for I hate my own people now. I was tracked down by Captain Vail, Buckskin Charlie, Daring Dick and the Cowboy Rangers, and all must fall under my hatred."

"As for May Lillie you know why I hate her: and you are well aware that I hate you more than any other human being, and, madman that I am, I shall study up a revenge that will be the very refinement of cruelty."

"You will not be missed for a long while, so I have plenty of time to get you to a place of safety across the Rio Grande."

"Now come, and let me tie you to your horse, for there is no escape for you now, Pawnee Bill."

"I am wholly at your service, Mad Carl; so as I cannot help myself, lead on, for I will follow," and Pawnee Bill arose to his feet, though he still felt dizzy from the blow he had received.

He was aided by Mad Carl to mount, then Carl took from his pocket a chain with a steel clasp upon either end.

These were clasped upon his ankles, and Pawnee Bill found himself literally chained to his horse by the Mad Cowboy.

It galled him deeply to be thus ironed, but he said in an indifferent way:

"You came well prepared, it seems, Mad Carl."

"Oh, yes, I came to capture and hold you."

"So far you are playing in giant luck; but every dog has his day, and this is yours."

"And yours is to come?"

"I hope so; but, tell me, how did you manage to shake the mad-house?"

"I planned and plotted day and night, and when the time came I struck the blow that freed me."

"I guess the blow killed?"

"It did, and it was one who had been kind to me; but I would have killed my own mother to gain my freedom, and seek revenge on you and *your wife*."

"Yes, I have heard that you have done something in the way of thinning out your family, such as killing your brother, eh?"

"Then let that all prove what I am capable of in your case," was the savage retort.

A moment after, taking the rein of Pawnee Bill's horse, he led him alongside of his own, and rode off of the trail, making the circuit which Daring Dick had so cleverly followed.

As he had to go through the pass, he drove the two horses on ahead, while he followed and destroyed their tracks as best he could, for if he was pursued, he did not wish to have the trailers see the tracks leading back through the canyon.

If they did not, then they would have to go on to where he had overtaken Pawnee Bill, and follow his course, and that would give him several hours' longer start.

But it was only a precaution, for the Mad Cowboy did not fear pursuit.

* Pawnee Bill, Gordon W. Lillie, was made White Chief of the Pawnees. He commanded a company of Pawnee scouts and did splendid service for the Government, and afterward, as Major Lillie was given a battalion of Indian police, or cavalry. The major is one of the noted characters of the Wild West.

THE AUTHOR.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TRACKERS.

DARING DICK was one of those wiry boys who never know fatigue, and was ready to go at any time on a frolic or the war-path.

He was body and soul in the rescue of Pawnee Bill, to whom he had become deeply attached during the stay of the scout at Paradise Ranch, and he knew how deeply May felt this second capture of her husband by one who certainly could be no other than Carl, the Mad Cowboy.

May Lillie had been greatly troubled by having to take Captain Vail and the Cowboy Rangers upon another perilous trail after one whom she had spared, saved from their hands.

Yet Mrs. Vail had kindly said:

"Well, May, if you erred it was on the side of mercy, so you cannot blame yourself, my dear."

"This time leave the man to the Cowboy Rangers, and you need never have fear of him again."

And so May Lillie had ridden away by the side of Captain Vail, Dick and Buckskin Charlie coming next and twenty cowboys on picked horses following.

The captain had doubled his force, after hearing Dick's report, as he was sure they would have to cross into Mexico and he wished to have men enough to depend upon, and also to show force enough to intimidate any prowling band who might dispute their going across the river.

He had also ordered another pack-horse, with extra provisions, and brought along four led animals for use in case harm befell any of those they were riding, or they broke down.

With hundreds of good horses in his herd, Captain Vail had picked out the very best.

Dick's fresh mount was a fine black mare that could run like the wind, and last as long, the cowboys said:

Violet wished to go, but her father feared that the fatigue would be too great for her, while he knew that May Lillie could ride down and tire out any man of the party unless it was "Little Wonder," as Dick was more frequently called by the cowboys.

The desire of all was to reach the trail of the Mad Cowboy and his prisoner, leading away from the pass, toward the river country.

Not one for an instant thought of going on to see the trail beyond, for they had perfect confidence in all that Dick had done.

He had seldom gone wrong, all knew, in trailing, and he had given his ideas in a way that satisfied his father and Buckskin Charlie that he was right.

So the horses were pushed rapidly, and it was some time before sunset when the trail was reached.

There were the tracks of the two horses, and that they were made by the animals of the Mad Cowboy and Pawnee Bill, Buckskin Charlie said he would swear to.

There too was the trail of Dick's big sorrel, where he had ridden on, as he had said to see just where the Mad Cowboy had gone.

The trail of the sorrel returning was also seen, to the spot where Dick had branched off in a straight run to the ranch as a crow flies.

In a short while the party came to where the trail rounded the spur of a range and from there went straight on for the Rio Grande trail.

Here it was where Daring Dick had turned back, and from there on the cowboys had to do the work.

Buckskin Charlie went ahead, and Dick kept by his side.

Then came two of the best trailers of the Cowboy Rangers, and the party went along at a gallop.

"The Mad Cowboy held on until night, Dick, I am sure, and you see he pushed his horses well, though he certainly could not have suspected any pursuit," Buckskin Charlie said.

"No, he had no reason for suspecting us, for his disguise was a good one, with his white wig and gray beard, Buckskin Charlie."

"But, what troubles me is how he captured Pawnee Bill."

"Oh, that was easy when Pawnee Bill suspected no treachery. Seeing him coming after him, and having him play the game of army courier, Captain Lillie was caught off his guard and thus captured," Buckskin Charlie said.

"Well, it will be like Captain Lillie to make his escape, for you know he did so before and was lying in wait for Mad Carl's coming back, and whoever he might bring with him."

"Yes, he's a game one, and ready to take advantage of anything that may turn up."

"But then he has got the cunning of a madman to deal with, Dick."

"And so have we, if he suspects us of being on his trail."

"Well, we can outwit him, I reckon, and if not, Miss May can, for she is as clever as any one I ever met and can follow a trail like an Indian."

"It's a plucky team, those two, Dick, Pawnee Bill and his pretty wife."

"Now it is," answered Dick, admiringly.

"And there's nothing slow about you, Dick," Buckskin Charlie said, with a smile.

"I've got to keep up with the time, Charlie, whatever is being played."

"Well, you do, my boy; but do you know that although all of us were in love with Miss May, and Pawnee Bill won her, I do not believe any one of us holds a grudge against him, no matter how we may envy him."

"I guess it's so, Charlie, but Miss May has no idea of becoming a widow for you boys to fall in love with over again, so she intends to have you rescue Pawnee Bill."

"And we'll do it, Dick. But the trail runs off here—see! It goes yonder, into the timber, and there is where Mad Carl camped last night."

"And in another hour we must camp, Charlie."

"Yes, Dick," and the cowboys bounded off on the trail of Mad Carl and his prisoner.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ACROSS THE RIVER.

THE trail of the two horses led, as Buckskin Charlie had surmised, to the night-camp of the Mad Cowboy.

The party saw that Mad Carl had made himself comfortable, and all were glad to discover, what they had not been assured of before, that Pawnee Bill was able to move about, and therefore not seriously wounded.

There were his boot-tracks plainly visible, and Buckskin Charlie made a discovery.

"See here, that devil has got Captain Lillie chained, for there is where the irons dragged, as he walked, and here is where he stepped on the chain and made its imprint on the ground."

This was decided to be the case, and May bit her lips to keep down her emotions.

The places where two blankets had been spread was seen, and the ashes of the fire were still warm.

"Mad Carl was in no hurry to break camp."

"As he expects no pursuit he will doubtless go slow, and can not be over forty miles ahead at the furthest," remarked Buckskin Charlie.

"Forty miles!" repeated May Lillie, and Dick cheered her with the rejoinder:

"It might have been a hundred, Miss May."

"Forty miles isn't very far."

The party now followed the tracks back to the main trail, and as they were to halt for the night within an hour they pushed their horses rapidly.

At last it became too dark to see the trail, and though it was supposed that Mad Carl would hold steadily on, it would not do to trust him, so a camping-place was sought for and the party went into camp.

A wicky-up was quickly built as a shelter for May, though she protested against it, and then she discovered that Captain Vail's thoughtfulness had provided extra blankets and comforts for her.

A good supper was cooked, for Buckskin Charlie excelled in the culinary art, and game shot during the day was broiled, potatoes were roasted, coffee made and home-made bread of the finest kind made up a regular feast which every one enjoyed.

The horses also found themselves in clover, and as the guard of two men were to be relieved every two hours it would give all a chance of getting considerable rest.

The sleepers were aroused before dawn, and as breakfast would be taken later, on the trail, for a rest for the horses, the party were soon in the saddle and the tracks taken up from where they had been dropped the night before.

On they pressed now at a canter, and the trail held on, as it had upon the other tracking of Mad Carl when he had Pawnee Bill a prisoner, straight for the same crossing of the Rio Grande, a ford very seldom used except by Mexican raiders in their crossing into Texas territory on a robbing expedition.

After a ride of three hours a halt was made for breakfast, and the horses had a rest of an hour, and a chance to feed, without saddles or bridles, and this refreshed them greatly.

Then on they pushed once more at the same slapping pace, which they knew, by the tracks of the Mad Cowboy's horses, was going four miles to his one.

Soon after noon they came in sight of the wild land bordering the river, and a halt was made for dinner, when it was seen that the Mad Cowboy's trail led into the water.

"He is not, by his tracks, over two hours ahead of us," Buckskin Charlie said.

"But you will go to the retreat up the river, where he hid before?" said May Lillie.

"Oh yes, Miss May, as soon as the horses have rested and gotten cool, for they are too warm to make them swim now."

"He may be there, and yet I fear not."

"As he did not expect pursuit he may have gone to his old retreat, Buckskin Charlie, for the night," Captain Vail remarked.

"True, sir, and yet my idea is that he has pushed right on across the river determined to take no chances."

"He once lived in Mexico, and certainly speaks the language like a native, while he knows well where to hide there."

Again the horses were relieved of their saddles and bridles, and staked out, and dinner was prepared.

The rest seemed a very long one to May Lillie, and yet she knew that it was only the safe way, and the best, for the horses.

At last they were called to mount, and down to the ford they rode, Buckskin Charlie leading.

In they dashed into the river, but instead of crossing, the captain of the cowboys turned up the stream, his keen eyes picking out the shallows and showing just where to lead the others to keep the horses from losing their footing, for at times it was breast deep to the animals.

At the ford two men were left with the pack-animals and led horses, while Buckskin Charlie guided the others up the stream.

A push against the current for half a mile brought them to a crevice in the right bank, and through it flowed a stream.

All rode ashore, and dismounting Buckskin Charlie and two of his men went up the ravine on foot, the others slowly following on horseback.

The ravine widened into a canyon with lofty banks, rising into cliffs, and the tops of which were rugged in the extreme.

There was timber in the upper end of the canyon, and a small stream fell from the highlands and flowed down to the river.

It was certainly a secure hiding-place, and here had Pawnee Bill been found before; but now not a sign could be seen that the Mad Cowboy had been there with his prisoner, so the party retraced their way and going down the stream were joined by those left there and all boldly crossed the river and took up the trail into the land of Mexico.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BANDITS OF THE RIO.

THE Mad Cowboy had wended his way with his prisoner without the slightest dread of pursuit, or that he might meet any one who would wrest him from him.

He had not ill-treated him, other than to keep him in irons, had spread his blankets for him when camping at night and shared his food with him; but except to harp upon his anticipated revenge he had nothing to say to him.

Pawnee Bill bore all with the utmost indifference, it seemed, and his manner worried his captor in that he could not make his prisoner feel dread of him, or show fear for his future.

At last they came to the Rio Grande, and Pawnee Bill queried:

"Going to the old retreat, Carl?"

"No!" was the savage reply.

"Oh, yes, I remember that you had bad luck there."

"I am going into Mexico."

"It's against the law to invade Mexico with an armed force, Mad Carl."

"I care nothing for law."

"So I have discovered," and Pawnee Bill relapsed into silence.

That there were pursuers upon his trail he could not believe, for the Mad Cowboy had told him how he had met May and Dick, and he had not wondered that they had not recognized him, as he certainly had been so cleverly dressed.

Once they had crossed the river the Mad Cowboy halted, and opened his pack.

He took therefrom the costume of a Mexican caballero, and dressed himself in it, taking off his false beard at the same time.

He also took out a razor and glass and shaved himself clean.

With the removal of the false beard Pawnee Bill discovered for the first time that the white hair was real, and not a wig.

"You have aged greatly since we last met, Mad Carl," he said, gazing upon the face of the man whom he saw now as he really was, with the change that had come upon him since he had been sent to the asylum.

"I have been where a man must needs grow old. I became an old man in a very few weeks," and the man for the first time spoke with tenderness in his voice.

But, instantly, he seemed to regret the weakness, as he said harshly:

"And you will age, too, Pawnee Bill; your hair will be white as snow ere I am done with you."

"Blondes do not age quickly," was the response.

The madman now rolled up the garments he had discarded, strapped them behind his saddle and mounting led the way once more on into Mexico.

"You seem to know the country, Mad Carl."

"Oh, yes, I came here when I was first a fugitive, not from justice, Pawnee Bill, though from the gallows."

"I found wild spirits who chimed in with my humor exactly, and having learned to speak Spanish in California, when a boy, I readily passed as a native."

"But I tired of the life and so became a Texan cowboy. Do you see yonder mountain summit?"

"I do."

"Well, I am going there, for under its shelter is the retreat of the Bandits of the Rio."

"Ah! a hard lot of Mexican cut-throats."

"Yes, they are just that. I was going to them before when I left you in the canyon across the river, but *your wife* brought me to earth with her lasso, and then sent me to an asylum. Now we are in Mexico and it is different."

"Suppose we should meet Mexican soldiers?"

"What care I for them? I am a special officer of the Secret Service of Mexico, I will tell them, sent into Texas to capture an American who is plotting against the country."

"You are the conspirator, you know," and the grim smile of the Mad Cowboy showed Pawnee Bill that he knew he could run the gantlet of a regiment of Mexican soldiers.

Pawnee Bill remained silent for some time, and then asked:

"Will the chief of the bandits of the Rio receive you, think you, when you have no gold to offer?"

"I shall be chief."

"But how?"

"I am not one to play second to any man."

"Yet the band has a chief?"

"Of course."

"And you expect him to yield to you?"

"I shall not ask him," was the complacent reply.

"Ah! you expect to ride boldly into a camp of Mexican robbers and declare yourself their chief?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Mad Carl, I am truly glad you brought me along."

"Why?"

"Because I shall enjoy exceedingly to see you work out the puzzle before you, and if you get killed, I shall rejoice still more."

The Mad Cowboy smiled and said:

"I was chief when I left, so I shall go back and resume my command."

"Pray do, for I wouldn't miss it for the world."

The cowboy made no response, but continued on his way, taking the different trails in a way that showed he knew just what he was about.

At last they turned into a valley that led up into the heart of the mountain range to which Mad Carl had pointed.

The valley narrowed as they progressed, and at last ended in a narrow canyon which penetrated the mountains.

On went the Mad Cowboy, until at last from above their heads came a hail in Spanish:

"Halt, senors, and hands up!"

The cowboy seemed expecting it, for he looked up and responded in the purest Spanish:

"I am Don Desperado, your old chief, and I have returned to my people."

"Ah, senor, I am glad to see you; but the one with you, Don Desperado?"

"I, a prisoner held for ransom."

"Good, senor! Pass on, for the men will be glad to welcome you back."

And on they rode, while Pawnee Bill remarked:

"You seem all right with the men, Mad Carl; but the chief?"

"Wait and see."

A ride of a mile further up the canyon, and by

a steep path they ascended a winding trail to a plateau, heavily timbered.

And here the captured Pawnee Bill beheld the picturesque camp of the Bandits of the Rio.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOR THE MASTERY.

As they came along Pawnee Bill had kept his eyes wide open, and had noted several other sentinels, yet they had not challenged them, having evidently been signaled by the first man that all was right.

The bandit camp consisted of a number of huts in two rows, with a large one at the upper end, over which floated a flag, with a red field and a red knife in the center.

There were perhaps thirty men about the huts, and all gazed upon the new-comers with considerable surprise.

"Ho, my men, do you not recognize your old chief, Don Desperado?" shouted the Mad Cowboy, and he continued:

"The Americanos captured me and kept me in a cell under torture all these years since I saw you last, and the agony I suffered bleached my hair as white as snow."

"But I am your chief still, my men, Don Desperado, come back to my people."

The Mexican bandits crowded eagerly around him, and about one-third seemed to recognize him now, while the new men of the band had heard often of his deeds while the leader of the Bandits of the Rio.

He grasped the hands of those who pressed about him, and continued:

"I have brought with me a man worth his weight in gold to me, and all he is valued at you shall enjoy."

"Now where is he who holds my place, for if I step into another's shoes, they must be the shoes of a dead man."

This was greeted with a cheer, and a voice said:

"The chief is up at the headquarters, and he has taken your name, senor."

"Ah! there can be but one Don Desperado."

"Come, my men, and let us see if he yields to me."

"If not, the best man will be chief."

"On up through the canyon went the Mad Cowboy, and the whole crowd pressed about him, all anxious to see the result of his bold claim for the leadership."

Out of the headquarters cabin stepped a man, rubbing his eyes, as though just awakened from a siesta.

He was a man of large frame, and had the face of one born in refinement, though evil had marred it sadly.

He had been an army officer, but sided with the party in a political revolution that got worsted, and to save himself from being shot, fled to the Bandits of the Rio.

It was just after the departure of Carl Grafton, and several of the men were fighting for the mastery.

So the new-comer, whose record was known as a daring officer and desperate man, offered to fight it out.

His terms were accepted; three duels followed and he won the mastery, taking the name of his predecessor, Don Desperado.

And now he regarded the coming of the crowd with surprise and anger. He was a good commander, but not a popular one. He treated his men too much like cattle, and they were willing for a change if the Mad Cowboy dared meet their chief.

"Well, what does this mean?" he demanded.

All eyes turned upon the Mad Cowboy, who answered with the greatest severity:

"Permit me to introduce myself, senor, as Don Desperado, the former chief of the Bandits of the Rio."

"Well, you deserted them, and what do you wish here now?"

"You wrong me, my dear senor, for I did not desert. I was captured by the Texans, and have been in a cell ever since undergoing a torture that has whitened my hair, though I am still a young man."

"I made my escape, and now I am here to resume my place as chief."

"Never! I yield to no man!"

"Then, senor, we must decide who rules, you or I."

"Be it so, if such be your humor."

"Name your weapons, senor."

"The sword."

"Should that fail?"

"It will not."

"Should it?"

"Revolvers, at ten paces, advancing and firing."

"That is just my style, senor."

"Are you ready?"

"Whenever you are."

The Mad Cowboy dismounted, while the chief said:

"Who is that with you?"

"A prisoner of mine I hold for purposes of my own."

The Mexican at once entered his cabin and soon returned, bearing two handsome rapiers.

"These are excellent blades, senor, take your choice."

"Thank you."

The bandits gathered around and watched the scene with deepest interest.

Upon his horse, to which he was chained, sat Pawnee Bill, also a deeply interested spectator.

The two men advanced toward each other without delay, saluted, and the blades crossed.

The Mexican had been famous in the army as a swordsman, and he frowned when he discovered that he was unable to instantly disarm, or run his enemy through.

He pressed him harder and harder, and the Mad Cowboy smiled and met every thrust with a skillful parry, until seeing that he was getting his foe angry and rattled, he said:

"There will be no need of the revolvers, senor, for I shall kill you now."

Almost with the words he struck the sword from the Mexican's grasp, and, as the latter's hand dropped upon a revolver in his belt, Carl drove his blade entirely through the chief's body, to the very hilt.

With a curse upon his lips the Mexican fell dead, while the Mad Cowboy said, as he raised his sombrero to the cheers of the fickle bandits:

"Men, I am still Don Desperado, your chief!"

Then he passed into the cabin, after giving an order to have the Mexican buried, and, leading Pawnee Bill's horse up to the door, he freed him from the chains about his feet and bade him follow him.

As they disappeared together in the cabin, a horse and rider dashed up to the spot where the Mexican lay dead.

The rider was a woman, young, and very beautiful.

Throwing herself from her horse she dropped on her knees by the side of the dead body and cried in a tone full of anguish:

"Dead! Andrea, speak to me!"

But the lips were forever silenced.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WOMAN'S WAY.

MAJOR ANDREA BONODEL had been a great gallant among the ladies, when he was a Mexican officer, and when he had fled to outlawry one who had loved him well, had give up home, health and all to follow his fortunes.

That one was Gabriella Garcia, the woman who had ridden up after the desperate duel and thrown herself by the dead body of the Mexican bandit chief.

For a long while she had remained there, the men looking on even with pity in their cruel hearts, and then she arose and asked with perfect calmness:

"Who did this deed?"

One of the men told her all that had occurred. She listened in silence, and then asked:

"Where is this man calling himself Don Desperado?"

"At the headquarters, senora."

"Bear this body to my cabin and leave it there."

"I will prepare it for the grave."

The cabin of the beautiful Mexican woman was further up in the mountain, and a cozy, pretty place it was, for Andrea Bonodel had not wished to have her remain at headquarters, near the men.

The body was borne there in silence, and then the woman walked quickly to the cabin where were the Mad Cowboy and his prisoner, the former "taking stock" as it were of the contents of the cabin.

As she entered both arose, and the Mad Cowboy bowed low, while he said:

"Pardon, senorita, I had not been told there was a lady in the camp."

"A prisoner, I suppose?"

"You are Don Desperado, senor?"

"Yes, senorita."

"It was you that killed the man who took your name?"

"Yes, senorita."

"Then, Don Desperado, to answer your question, I must tell you that I am a prisoner, though the wife of the man you killed, for he

forced me into marriage with him, and has held me here a captive for several years.

"I claim your protection and mercy, senor, now that you are chief."

"You shall have both, senora, and you shall be free to leave this camp whenever it is your will to do so."

"You are most kind, senor; and may I ask if that gentleman is also a prisoner of the late Don, a new captive, for I have just come down here from my cabin further up the mountain."

"This gentleman, senora, is a prisoner of mine, and one whom I shall hold for my special revenge, as he has wronged me cruelly."

"Yes, I did the wrong to marry the woman I loved and who loved me, before he ever saw her, but this new Don Desperado, senora, has a way of lying that appalls me," said Pawnee Bill in good Spanish, to the great surprise of the Mad Cowboy who did not know that he understood it.

"Well, Senor Don Desperado, may I ask you to take supper at my cabin this evening, and as you have so kindly said that I should have my freedom after my long and cruel captivity, I will explain to you my wishes."

"Yes, senorita, I will come; but may I bring the senor here, as I do not wish to lose sight of him just yet?"

"Certainly, senor; and now thanking you for the great service you have done the country in slaying the bandit chief, I will say *adios*, expecting you at sunset, you and your prisoner."

With this the beautiful Mexican woman bowed herself out and the Mad Cowboy said:

"You see I am not merciless, Pawnee Bill, to any one but those who have wronged me?"

"Yes, I see," was the quiet rejoinder.

Two hours after the Mad Cowboy and his prisoner wended their way up the mountain trail to the cabin of the bandit chief's wife.

She welcomed them in her sweet way, and bade them be seated, while she aided her servant, a peon woman, in preparing supper.

What she had done with the body of the chief she did not make known, and though Mad Carl had been told that she had claimed it, he asked no questions about its disposal.

CHAPTER XXX. CONCLUSION.

THE Cowboy Rangers crossing into Mexico, were prepared to face all the obstacles that might bar their way.

If they met Mexican soldiers, Captain Veil intended to tell them the truth, and ask them to accompany them to the retreat of the robbers.

If they met lawless bands they would treat them as such, and the Cowboy Rangers were not the men to trifle with.

Buckskin Charlie picked out the Mad Cowboy's trail from the others on the Mexican side of the river, and followed it unerringly, though very slowly.

Night again brought them to a halt, and they went into camp without having seen a Mexican.

They kept a double guard, however, that night, and slept ready for flight or fight, as the case might be.

The next morning they had breakfast before leaving camp, and then started once more upon the trail of the Mad Cowboy and his prisoner.

It was not long before they beheld a horseman coming down the mountain-side.

One glance and May Lillie cried:

"It is Gordon!"

Then they all went in a charge toward him. He had drawn rein at sight of them, but quickly recognizing the Cowboy Rangers he had ridden forward to meet them.

It was a warm greeting between Pawnee Bill and his brave little wife, and then he said:

"Quick! you must not remain here, for the bandits may be following me, and they outnumber us, while we wish no trouble on Mexican soil."

His advice was taken and the retreat to the river began.

Riding by his side May asked:

"But, how did you escape, Gordon?"

"A beautiful woman aided me."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

"And the Mad Cowboy?"

"Is dead!"

"Dead?" cried all in chorus.

"Yes."

"Did you kill him?" asked Dick.

"No."

"Who did?"

"A woman."

"Gordon, are you trying to make me jealous?"

"No, indeed, May, and when we camp on the

other shore of the Rio Grande I will tell you the whole story."

"You are sure that Mad Carl is dead?"

"Certain."

"You saw him after he was shot?"

"I saw him dead, for he was not shot," and the rapid riding prevented more conversation.

At last the river was reached and crossed, and the cowboys went into camp.

Then all gathered about Captain Lillie to hear his story.

He told of his capture by "Old Buckskin," as he had supposed the man to be, and of the going to the bandit camp, the duel, and the chief's wife.

"But, let me tell you, that she played her part well, for she loved that man with all her soul, and was seeking revenge in her kind treatment of Mad Carl."

"We went to her home to supper, and it was a good one, too. I enjoyed it, and Carl seemed to also. At last he grew drowsy, started up, tried to rise, and sunk back in his chair, while the woman sprang to her feet and said:

"Now, senor, I have my revenge, for I have poisoned you to avenge my dear dead husband."

"I was horrified; but she gave me little time to think, for she said:

"Senor Americano, I will send you from this camp by a secret pass. I have a horse ready for you, and the peon woman has gone for your weapons to the chief's cabin."

"See! he has fallen from his chair and is dead!" and she pointed to the Mad Cowboy.

"I placed my hand upon his heart and felt no throb."

"Oh, senor, what I gave him would poison a dozen men—go!" she cried.

"And you?" I asked.

"I will leave as soon as my servant returns from showing you the trail, for I go another way."

"The peon woman returned, and she had my weapons."

"It is useless to say I thanked my preserver most warmly, mounted the horse given me, and followed the peon woman by the secret pass."

"It was a trip of several miles, and directing me how to find the mountain trail she left me to return to her mistress, who she said would at once escape by another road, and return to her home."

"I got into some rough country, so held up until dawn, when I found the trail, and was fairly startled when I saw you coming, for I thought I would have to fight a large force of bandits."

"But, here I am, May, and thank Heaven that terrible man, Mad Carl, is dead."

A fervent "Amen!" was said to this by all, and after a long rest the party started on the back trail, Pawnee Bill branching off at the Pass to go on to his Indian command.

That he rendered valuable service to the Government with his "red-skin cavalry" is well known, and that he has a comfortable home now in Oklahoma is also well known. At that home Daring Dick, the Little Wonder, is always a welcome visitor, as are also the other friends of Pawnee Bill and his lovely wife, the Lariat Queen.

THE END.

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